SPECIAL HOLIDAY ISSUE!

Asimov's
SCIENCE FICTION

DECEMBER 2001

A Christmas Novella by Connie Willis

Kage Baker
Stephen Baxter
John M. Ford

Part Two of
Robert Silverberg's
Thrilling New Novel
The Longest Way Home

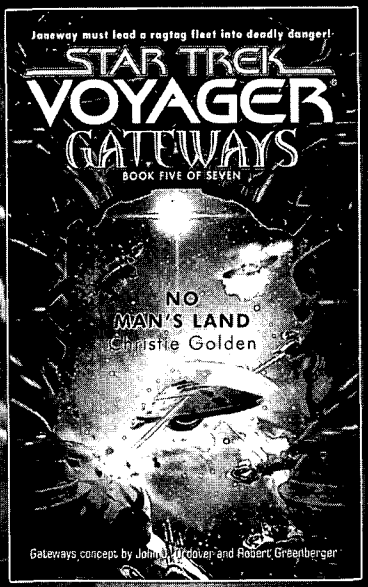
$3.50 U.S. / $4.95 CAN.
12
0 74851 08621 6

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE MOST EXCITING CROSSOVER IN STAR TREK® HISTORY CONTINUES!

GATEWAYS

Missing for two hundred millennia, the legendary Iconians have returned, bringing with them the secret of the Gateways—a means of interdimensional teleportation across vast distances, instantly linking distant planets and civilizations. Awakened once again, the ancient Gateways are now initiating an interstellar crisis that will rock the *Star Trek* universe to its very core!



Warring worlds find a deadly new use for a miraculous device!
STAR TREK
NEW FRONTIER
GATEWAYS
BOOK SIX OF SEVEN
COLD WARS
Peter David
Gateways concept by John J. Ordover and Robert Greenberger

The ultimate adventure continues this October wherever paperback books are sold.

Star Trek Books
Published by Pocket Books
A VIACOM COMPANY

www.SimonSays.com/st

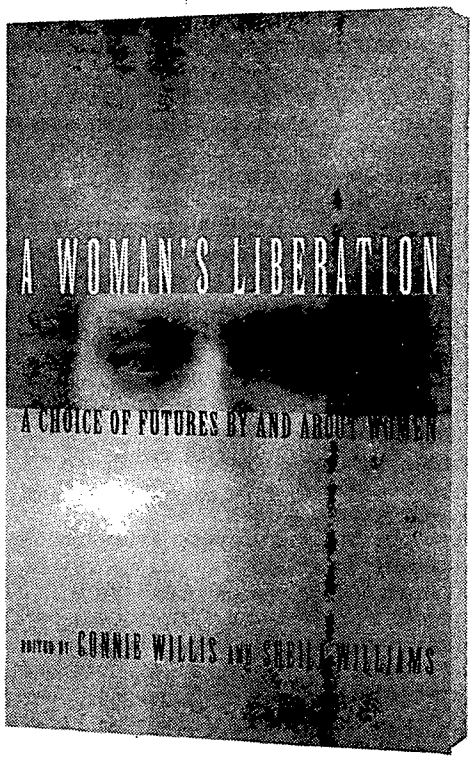
www.StarTrek.com

™ ®, & © 2001 Paramount Pictures. All rights reserved. STAR TREK and related marks are trademarks of Paramount Pictures. Pocket Books Authorized User.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

NEW FROM ASPECT

From the most acclaimed female science fiction writers of our time comes a collection of powerful feminist tales that explores the boundless scope of the human experience.



Featuring classic stories by award-winning science fiction authors including Anne McCaffrey, Connie Willis, Octavia E. Butler, and Ursula K. Le Guin.

A NEW PAPERBACK

BOOK MARK Publishing

ASPECT

Where imagination knows no bounds

Visit our Web site at www.twbookmark.com

©2001 TIME WARNER TRADE PUBLISHING, INC

The Aspect name and logo are registered trademarks of Time Warner Trade Publishing, Inc.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Vol. 25 No. 12
(Whole Number 311)
December 2001

Next Issue on Sale
November 20, 2001

Asimov's Science Fiction

14

94

Cover illustration by
ALDO SPADONI

www.asimovs.com

SERIAL

94 The Longest Way Home (Part 2 of 3) — Robert Silverberg

NOVELLA

14 deck.halls@boughs/holly — Connie Willis

NOVELETTE

68 The Applesauce Monster — Kage Baker

SHORT STORIES

47 My Stolen Sabre — Uncle River
56 Grey Earth — Stephen Baxter
92 In the Days of the Comet — John M. Ford

POEM

54 All I Want for Christmas — Robert Frazier & James Patrick Kelly

DEPARTMENTS

4 Reflections: Hobson-Jobson — Robert Silverberg
9 On the Net: Singular — James Patrick Kelly
137 On Books — Paul Di Filippo
142 The SF Conventional Calendar — Erwin S. Strauss

Gardner Dozois: Editor
Sheila Williams: Executive Editor
Isaac Asimov: Editorial Director (1977-1992)
Peter Kanter: Publisher
Christine Begley: Associate Publisher

Stories from Asimov's have won 38 Hugos and 24 Nebula Awards, and our editors have received 15 Hugo Awards for Best Editor. Asimov's was also the 2001 recipient of the Locus Award for Best Magazine.

Asimov's Science Fiction (USPS 522-310). Published monthly except for a combined October/November double issue by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. One year subscription $39.97 in the United States and U.S. possessions. In all other countries $47.97 (GST included in Canada), payable in advance in U.S. funds. Address for subscription and all other correspondence about them, Box 54033, Boulder, CO 80322-4033. Allow 6 to 8 weeks for change of address. Address for all editorial matters: *Asimov's Science Fiction*, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, N.Y. 10016. *Asimov's Science Fiction* is the registered trademark of Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. © 2001 by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. All rights reserved, printed in the U.S.A. Protection secured under the Universal and Pan American Copyright Conventions. Reproduction or use of editorial or pictorial content in any manner without express permission is prohibited. All submissions must include a self-addressed, stamped envelope; the publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. Periodical postage paid at Norwalk, CT and additional mailing offices. Canadian postage paid at Montreal, Quebec, Canada Post International Publications Mail, Product Sales Agreement No. 260657. POSTMASTER, send change of address to *Asimov's Science Fiction*, Box 54625, Boulder, CO 80328-4625. In Canada return to Transcontinental Sub Dept, 525 Louis Pasteur, Boucherville, Quebec, J4B 8E7. ISSN 1065-2698. GST #R123293128

Printed in CANADA

PRINTED WITH SOY INK

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

SCI FI

Read "Goddesses"

by Linda Nagata

"One of the year's best...not to be missed."

–Peter D. Tillman, *SF Site*

"Nagata's life-sized characters...compel readers to continue. A great deal of power is stored in this well-written story."

–*Publisher's Weekly*, e-publishing section

"Goddesses"
is the first electronically published story to win the Nebula Award. You can find "Goddesses" and other stories by such authors as Bruce Sterling, Ursula K. Le Guin, Pat Cadigan, and Nancy Kress on SCIFI.COM.

SCI FICTION

www.scifi.com/scifiction

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

Hobson-Jobson

The late and very much lamented writer Avram Davidson was an inveterate browser in other people's libraries. He was wandering through mine one day some three or four decades ago when suddenly he cried out, "By Jove! You have a *Hobson-Jobson!*" (Avram was one of the very few people of my acquaintance who could say something like "By Jove!" and not appear silly or affected.)

"Yes," I said gravely. "Indeed I do."

Avram pounced on it and spent half an hour avidly thumbing its pages—for *Hobson-Jobson,* as I will explain in a moment, is a book, a whopping thick grayish-black book, 1021 pages long and close to four inches thick. Avram never forgot that I had a copy of it. In a letter many years later he referred to it, expressed the pious hope that I might let him have it if I had no further use for it, and immediately admonished himself, "Thou shalt not covet thy colleague's *Hobson-Jobson.*" He, and also, I suspect, L. Sprague de Camp, are the only colleagues of mine likely to have been familiar with this book, unless the scholarly Harry Turtledove knows of it. (Harry?) Neither Sprague nor Avram is with us any longer. But I am still here, and so is my *Hobson-Jobson,* and I propose to take this opportunity to tell you about it.

Hobson-Jobson is a dictionary—a dictionary that was, in essence, compiled by aliens living as conquerors on a distant world. Those alien conquerors had evolved a patois with which to communicate with the natives, a language made up out of largely mispronounced fragments of the natives' own language mixed with bits of their own slang, and after many years one of the conquerors put together a huge dictionary of that patois for the benefit of later generations of aliens who were coming out to serve in the administration that governs the conquered planet.

The conquered "planet" in question was, in fact, the subcontinent of India, and the compilers of *Hobson-Jobson* were two learned officials of the British Raj that ruled India in Queen Victoria's time: Arthur C. Burnell and Sir Henry Yule. Burnell, who lived only from 1840 to 1882, held judicial posts in southern India, but, like many officials of the Raj, devoted much of his time to studying Indian culture; he collected and translated many ancient Sanskrit manuscripts, particularly those dealing with aspects of Hindu law, and published a celebrated handbook on Sanskrit. His early death was ascribed to a combination of overwork and the debilitating effects of the torrid climate of Madras.

Yule, his collaborator on *Hobson-Jobson,* was an even more formidable scholar-civil servant. As a member of the Bengal Engineers he served in two wars with the Sikhs and was otherwise active in various Anglo-Indian political and military affairs before retiring in 1862 with the rank of colonel to devote the rest of his life to the study of the medieval history and geography of Central Asia. His most famous book was a magnificent three-volume edition of *The Travels of Marco Polo,* still a definitive text. For a decade beginning

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in 1872 Yule corresponded with Burnett concerning the immense number of curious words that had entered the vocabulary of the British in India, and in 1886 he published their joint findings under the title of *Hobson-Jobson.* My copy is the second edition, much expanded under the editorial guidance of William Crooke and published in 1903.

Yule's preface tells us that "words of Indian origin have been insinuating themselves into English ever since the end of the reign of Elizabeth and the beginning of that of King James, when such terms as *calico, chintz,* and *gingham* had already effected a lodgment in English warehouses and shops, and were lying in wait for entrance into English literature. Such outlandish guests grew more frequent 120 years ago, when, soon after the middle of last century, the numbers of Englishmen in the Indian services, civil and military, expanded with the great acquisition then made by the [British East India] Company; and we meet them in vastly greater abundance now."

Some random sampling of the vast volume will indicate why Avram Davidson, that erudite collector of the esoteric and arcane, yearned to have access to *Hobson-Jobson* for use in his own marvelous stories. Here, for example, we find *moorpunky,* defined as "'peacock-tailed' or 'peacock-winged,' the name given to certain state pleasure-boats on the Gangetic rivers, now only (if it all) surviving at Murshidabad." How Avram would have loved to send a couple of his raffish characters sailing down the Ganges aboard a moorpunky! Or we have *chuprassy,* about which we are told, "From the Hindu *chaprasi,* the bearer of a *chapras,* a badge-plate inscribed with the name of the office to which the bearer is attached." Of a multitude of such delicious minutiae was the typ-

GARDNER DOZOIS
Editor

SHEILA WILLIAMS
Executive Editor

BRIAN BIENIOWSKI
Editorial Assistant

TREVOR QUACHRI
Technical Assistant

STEPHANIE RATCLIFFE
Editorial Assistant

LINDA LEE WHITE
Editorial Assistant

VICTORIA GREEN
Senior Art Director

JUNE LEVINE
Associate Art Director

CAROLE DIXON
Senior Production Manager

ABIGAIL BROWNING
Manager Subsidiary Rights and Marketing

SCOTT LAIS
Contracts & Permissions

JULIA McEVOY
Manager, Advertising Sales

CONNIE GOON
Advertising Sales Coordinator

BRUCE W. SHERBOW
Vice President of Sales and Marketing

SANDY MARLOWE
Circulation Services

PETER KANTER
Publisher

CHRISTINE BEGLEY
Associate Publisher

SUSAN KENDRIOSKI
Executive Director, Art and Production

ISAAC ASIMOV
Editorial Director
(1977-1992)

ADVERTISING REPRESENTATIVE
David Geller Publishers' Rep. (212) 455-0100

Please do not send us your manuscript until you've gotten a copy of our manuscript guidelines. To obtain this, send us a self-addressed, stamped business-size envelope (what stationery stores call a number 10 envelope), and a note requesting this information. Please write "manuscript guidelines" in the bottom left-hand corner of the outside envelope. The address for this and for all editorial correspondence is *Asimov's Science Fiction,* 475 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016. While we're always looking for new writers, please, in the interest of time-saving, find out what we're looking for, and how to prepare it, before submitting your story.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ical Davidson story constructed. (Jack Vance could have done something with the word, too. Perhaps he has. He's another who might own a *Hobson-Jobson.*)

Here we have *bobbery-bob*—"The Anglo-Indian colloquial representation of a common exclamation of Hindus when in surprise or grief—*Bap-re!* or *Bap-re Bap,* 'O Father!' " To which Yule and Burnell add, "We have known a friend from north of Tweed whose ordinary interjection was 'My great-grandmother!' ")

And here is *bobachee*: "A cook (male). This is an Anglo-Indian vulgarization of *bawarchi,* a term originally brought, according to Hammer, by the hordes of Chingiz Khan into Western Asia. At the Mongol court the *Bawarchi* was a high dignitary, 'Lord Sewer,' or the like." Lord Sewer?

A few pages on we have a discussion of *bosh,* telling us that "this is alleged to be taken from the Turkish *bosh,* signifying 'empty, vain, useless, void of sense, meaning, or utility.' But we have not been able to trace its history or first appearance in English." "*Bosh!,*" it seems to me, is a word Avram must have used, and quite often, too.

A flip of the pages and we are at *lall-shraub,* which is what the officers of the Raj called red wine, from the Hindu "lal-sharab." We get *grunthee,* "a sort of native chaplain attached to Sikh regiments." We get *gubber,* "some kind of gold ducat or sequin." We get *gudge,* a measurement intended to be the equivalent of a yard, but ranging in various districts from 18 to 52 1/8 inches.

There is a considerable disquisition on *opium,* a substance of much interest to the Raj, since the British cheerfully financed their activities in India by selling great quantities of that drug to China. Yule and Burnell observe that the word is probably Greek in origin, not Oriental, and they magisterially brush aside one philologist's derivation of it from a Sanskrit word meaning "snake venom." Burnell evidently had a serious interest in opium—a purely scholarly one, we must assume—for we are given, appended to this entry, a long series of extracts from travelers' accounts of the drug, going back to Pliny in A.D. 70.

Our familiar word *orange* gets three dense columns, too. Our authors write, "A good example of plausible but entirely incorrect etymology is that of orange from Lat. *aurantium.* The latter word is in fact an ingenious medieval fabrication. The word obviously came from the Arab. *naranj,* which is again a form of Pers. *narang,* or *narangi,*" and so on, not entirely with the firmest etymological backing, to the Sanskrit *nagaranga.*

And so on and so on. It is a book of linguistic wonders, and, after playing with it myself this morning after a long absence from it, I can see why Avram yearned so passionately to possess a copy. I cherished mine too much to give it to him, in the way some generous Oriental potentate might have given a treasure to an admiring guest, but I do hope he found one sooner or later. It is a classic of dictionary-making. The Anglo-Indian Raj is gone—a vanished world—and so is most of its language, though much remains behind in our own daily speech. And *Hobson-Jobson,* that great blocky monument of verbiage, remains also, a fossil remainder to remind us of what once was—a trilobite of a book.

Oh—and that title, *Hobson-Jobson*—

Page 419: "*Hobson-Jobson,* a native festal excitement: a *tamasha* (see TUMASHA); but especially the *Moharram* ceremonies. This phrase may be taken as a typical one of the most highly assimilated class of Anglo-Indian *argot,* and we have ven-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

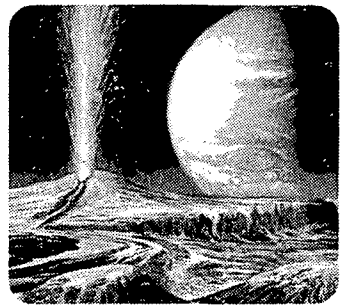
NOW IN PAPERBACK FROM
ASPECT

"Complex...hair-raising suspense...
a top-notch story. Highly recommended." –*Library Journal*

"WHEELERS is wonderful...ambitious but rigorous."
–Larry Niven, Hugo and Nebula Award-winning author of *Ringworld*

A startling discovery is made below the icy surface of Callisto, the eighth moon of Jupiter. Buried beneath the hellish Jovian atmosphere is the last line of defense against deadly comets striking a trapped alien race. Suddenly, these "wheelers" fire, quickly shifting Callisto to safety–and hurtling a comet packing certain annihilation straight toward earth.

wheelers



ian stewart
and jack cohen

AUTHORS OF *THE COLLAPSE OF CHAOS*

"Ambitious and entertaining."–*New York Times Book Review*

Where Imagination Knows No Bounds

ASPECT

BOOKsense Partner

Visit our Web site at www.twbookmark.com

©2001 Time Warner Publishing, Inc.
The Aspect name and logo are registered trademarks of Time Warner Trade Publishing, Inc.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tured to borrow from it a concise alternative title for this Glossary. It is peculiar to the British soldier and his surroundings, with whom it probably originated, and with whom it is by no means obsolete, as we once supposed. My friend Major John Trotter tells me that he has repeatedly heard it used by British soldiers in the Punjab; and has heard it also from a regimental Moonshee. It is in fact an Anglo-Saxon version of the wailings of the Mahommedans as they beat their breasts in the procession of the *Moharram*—'Ya Hasan! Ya Hasain!'"

Not content with that, though, our learned authors go on to trace the phrase through centuries of travel literature, beginning with a sixteenth-century Italian who rendered it as "Vah Hussein! Sciah Hussein!" and on through "Hosseen Gosseen" and "Hossy Gossy" to "Saucem Saucem" by 1710, the "Jaksom Baksom" reported in 1725, "Hassein Jassein" of 1763, and, finally, a notice in the *Oriental Sporting Magazine* of 1873, where Indians are described as "making sich [sic] a noise, firing and troompeting and shouting *Hobson Jobson, Hobson Jobson.*"

Hobson-Jobson indeed. And also *calloo, callay.* It is with the greatest of effort that I refrain from quoting the remaining 1018 pages of it for you, right here and now. ○

Chat online
with your favorite authors!

Halloween **October 23 @ 9:00 P.M. EST**

Andy Duncan, Esther M. Friesner, and Lawrence Watt-Evans on the latest Ace anthology.

Hot New Writers **November 13 @ 9:00 P.M. EST**

Cory Doctorow, Jim Grimsley, Thomas Harlan, Kelly Link, and Kristine Smith.

Walter Mosley **November 27 @ 9:00 P.M. EST**

on his new book, **Futurelands**.

Go to **www.scifi.com/chat** or link to the chats via our home page (**www.asimovs.com**). Chats are held in conjunction with *Analog* and the Sci-fi Channel and are moderated by *Asimov's* editor, Gardner Dozois.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

On the Net

James Patrick Kelly

SINGULAR

"Within thirty years, we will have the technological means to create superhuman intelligence. Shortly after, the human era will be ended."

—Abstract of a paper given by Vernor Vinge at the VISION-21 Symposium, March 30-31,1993

the end begins

Of course being science fiction readers, we saw the Singularity coming long before the mundane world. In fact, one of our best writers and thinkers, Vernor Vinge, actually named it. I can't find an official page for Vinge but check out the **Singular Vernor Vinge Page** at <*http://www.ugcs.caltech.edu/~phoenix/vinge/*>.

Vinge's idea is that, with the accelerating advances in technology, it won't be long before *something* surpasses human intelligence. The paths to that singular *something* are many. One leads to—and passes through—artificial intelligence. Is it possible to design a hardware/software interface that will embody a strong AI, one that can pass the Turing Test? This famous thought experiment was first proposed by the mathematician, cryptographer, and cybernetic visionary **Alan Turing** <*http://www.turing.org.uk/turing/*>. Imagine a setup in which a human and a computer could respond to questions anonymously, so that the interrogator had no clues as to whether the responses came from man or machine, other than by whatever he could glean from their content. If a computer were clever enough to fool the human interrogator, Turing asked, why would we not judge it as intelligent as a human? For years, experts have debated whether the Turing Test is valid and whether any computer will ever be able to pass it. But if a computer *should* pass the test, it seems unlikely that the human standard will be the upper limit of intelligence. Technological momentum will carry our creations far beyond our own gene-given capabilities. And what happens then?

Another path to Singularity leads through improved human/machine interfaces. What if we could enhance our memory and creativity cybernetically? Sophomores could plug a geometry chip into a slot in the backs of their heads. Your Palm Pilot's granddaughter would live just east of your occipital lobe. Since the eighties, SF writers have been busily exploring the notion of *wetware*, a slippery term which sometimes refers to the human nervous system but which more often describes a mind with both biological and manufactured components. Coinage of the term *wetware* is commonly attributed to **Rudy Rucker** <*http://www.mathcs.sjsu.edu/faculty/rucker/*>, professor of mathematics at San Jose State University and gonzo transrealist.

Yet another path would involve

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

purely biological improvements to intelligence—not to mention the human body. The mapping phase of **The Human Genome Project** <*http://www.ornl.gov/hgmis/*> is already ahead of schedule and offers the tantalizing prospect that we might someday be able to control the evolution of future generations, or even tinker with your genes and mine. The Singularity starts the day after the first posthuman baby is born, or possibly around the time that Grandpa Kelly gets his **Hayflick limit** <*http://www.remissions.org/hayflick%20limit.html*> reset.

read these now

Vernor Vinge's original paper <*http://www.student.nada.kth.se/~nv91-asa/Trans/vinge*> is already eight years old—an eternity in these fast-forward times. And yet it repays close reading or re-reading. After all, Alexis de Tocqueville's **DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA** <*http://www.wakeamerica.com/past/books/detocqueville/*> is a hundred and sixty-six years old and people continue to consult it. Am I saying that a mere science fiction writer's insights are as important as those of the legendary de Tocqueville? Well, if Vernor Vinge is right, then the Singularity will be the Mother of all Revolutions, more important that the American, French, Industrial, and Russian Revolutions combined. And then *squared*.

Vinge wrote of the dilemma of "hard" science fiction writers attempting to imagine a future dominated by some form of superhumanity. "More and more, these writers felt an opaque wall across the future. Once, they could put such fantasies millions of years in the future. Now they saw that their most diligent extrapolations resulted in the unknowable . . . soon. Once, galactic empires might have seemed a Post-Human domain. Now, sadly, even interplanetary ones are." He went on to write that as the Singularity hurtles down upon us, more and more of our cultural institutions would sense its looming shadow.

Six years later, two books were published which took a hard look at the Singularity. One was *Robot: Mere Machine to Transcendent Mind* by **Hans Moravec** <*http://www.frc.ri.cmu.edu/~hpm/*>. I commended this book and Professor Moravec to your attention in an earlier installment. Suffice it to say Moravec makes a valiant and at times awe-inspiring attempt to peek through the Singularity (although he does not exactly endorse the concept in so many words) and see what's on the other side. The other was *The Age of Spiritual Machines* by **Ray Kurzweil** <*http://www.kurzweilai.net/*>. Kurzweil is the Thomas Edison of the computer age; he was the principal developer of "the first omni-font optical character recognition, the first print-to-speech reading machine for the blind, the first CCD flat-bed scanner, the first text-to-speech synthesizer, the first music synthesizer capable of recreating the grand piano and other orchestral instruments, and the first commercially marketed large vocabulary speech recognition device." *The Age of Spiritual Machines* is a delightful read: a tour of the next hundred years guided by a gifted futurist with a sense of humor. In it, Kurzweil argues that we'll probably be taking the middle path to the Singularity: we and our computers will become one.

You'll find lively essays by divers hands about the **Singularity** <*http://www.kurzweilai.net/meme/frame.html?m=1*> on KurzweilAI.net, including "Tearing Toward the Spike" by Australian SF writer **Damien Broderick** <*http://www.*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

thespike.addr.com/>; "What is Friendly AI?" by Eliezer S. Yudkowsky, a force in the Singularitarian community; "Singularity Math Trialogue" by Kurzweil, Moravec, and Vinge (actually an exchange of email); and an excerpt from Kurweil's next book, *The Singularity Is Near.*

As an aside, I should add that KurzweilAI.net is the most amazing site I've visited since I began this gig. It addresses not only the Singularity, but also immortality, virtual reality, machine consciousness, and a range of possible futures. Some of the great visionaries of our time have contributed essays to the site and return from time to time to defend their thinking on a bulletin board. From this site you can download **AARON** <*http://www.kurzweilcyberart.com/*>, an AI that creates original paintings, or meet **Ramona** <*http://www.kurzweilai.net/meme/frame.html?m=9*> "the first live virtual recording and performing artist," who just happens to be Kuzweil's female alter ego.

But as important as *Robot* and *The Age of Spiritual Machines* were, the general public did not really twig to the idea that we might experience the Singularity in our lifetimes until **WIRED** <*http://www.wired.com/*> ran **Bill Joy's** <*http://www.sun.com/aboutsun/media/ceo/mgt_joy.html*> apocalyptic "**Why The Future Doesn't Need Us**" <*http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/8.04/joy_pr.html*> in its April 2000 issue. The memorable cover illustration was of a crumpled page of a dictionary that read in part: "**human** (adj.) of, belonging to, or typical of the extinct species *Homo sapiens*." Where Kurzweil takes a fairly optimistic view of the end of the world as we know it, Joy, Chief Scientist and CEO of Sun Microsystems, worries that the coming of superintelligence will lead to human extinction. He draws an analogy between people working on Singularitarian technologies like Kurzweil and Moravec—and himself—and the scientists who developed the atomic bomb. Maybe they should never have signed on to the Manhattan Project and maybe we should now rein in our own R&D efforts. "The only realistic alternative I see" Joy writes, "is relinquishment: to limit development of the technologies that are too dangerous, by limiting our pursuit of certain kinds of knowledge."

sez you

Joy's article caught the mainstream media by surprise and soon, ABC, the BBC, NPR, *USA Today,* the New York *Times and* the Washington *Post,* among others, swarmed the story. The staff at the **Center for the Study of Technology and Society** <*http://www.tecsoc.org/*> has posted an excellent summary of the backing and forthing at **Bill Joy's Hi-Tech Warning** <*http://www.tecsoc.org/innovate/focusbilljoy.htm*>. This page outlines the arguments for both sides of the relinquishment issue and points to possible compromises.

But there are those who scoff at Bill Joy's anxiety attack. For example, **The Singularity Institute for Artificial Intelligence** <*http://www.singinst.org/*>. Its charitable purpose "is to bring about the Singularity—the technological creation of greater-than-human intelligence—by building real AI. We believe that such a Singularity would result in an immediate, worldwide, and material improvement to the human condition." The Secretary/ Treasurer of the Singularity Institute is Eliezer S. Yudkowsky, who has a short piece on Friendly AI over on KurzweilAI.net. From the Institute's page you can click to the more ambitious **Creat-**

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing Friendly AI 0.9 <*http://www.singinst.org/CFAI/index.html*>, an enthusiastic book-length exploration of the concept. Then there are the **Transhumans** <*http://www.aleph.se/Trans/Alliance/*>, a group that seeks "the continuation and acceleration of the evolution of intelligent life beyond its currently human form and human limitations by means of science and technology, guided by life-promoting principles and values." Not to mention their close allies, the **Extropians** <*http://www.extropy.org/*>, who advocate a specific flavor of transhumanism. You can click to various attacks on relinquishment from this page; among them is "A Response to Bill Joy" by Ray Kurzweil, who serves on the Council of Advisors to the Extropy Institute. Kurzweil disagrees with Joy on the "granularity" of relinquishment, by which he means that entire technologies need not be abandoned when only certain specific outcomes need be prevented. As an example, he points out that **Eric Drexler** <*http://www.foresight.org/FI/Drexler.html*>, the guru of nanotechnology, has called for researchers to relinquish development of entities that can replicate in the natural environment.

exit

Do I believe that we're headed for the Techno-Rapture? I honestly don't know—although my own novels and stories are certainly filled with transhuman themes. I do believe that the future is going to be strange in ways that may break those who aren't intellectually and emotionally flexible. But let me come at the question from another direction.

Earlier this year the online version of **Locus** <*http://www.locusmag.com/*> asked its readers to "Name the five deceased twentieth century SF & fantasy writers you think will still be read fifty years from now." The top five in order, according to this sample of SF cognoscenti, were **Robert A. Heinlein** <*http://www.dahoudek.com/heinlein/index.html*>, **Isaac Asimov** <*http://www.clark.net/pub/edseiler/WWW/asimov_home_page.html*>, **J.R.R. Tolkien** <*http://www.tolkiensociety.org/*>, **Philip K. Dick** <*http://www.philipkdick.com/*> and **Frank Herbert** <*http://www.dunenovels.com/*>.

While I might argue with the ranking of these worthies, and urge consideration of several who are missing, they strike me as being a reasonable roster of SF's Valhalla at this point in time. But the accuracy of this list assumes that we know who will be reading this stuff in 2051.

Vernor Vinge, born in 1944, is a long way from being deceased, thank you very much. But for my money, we—and whatever entities we share the world with in fifty years—will regard him as one of the immortals. ○

CORRECTION:

Due to a printer's error, a word was deleted from most copies of the September "On the Net: Exploring." The correct sentence on page 13 should have read: "~~Drunken~~ Unsteady guests may trip and fall." Readers can find an unexpurgated version of this column on line at *www.asimovs.com*.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"SCI FICTION...has established itself in just a few months as easily the premiere source of original fiction on the Web... and indeed, as one of the highest-quality venues for original SF and fantasy anywhere."

–Mark Kelly, *Locus*

"Ellen [Datlow] has quickly established SCI FICTION as one of the best places on the Internet to find...short fiction."

–Gardner Dozois, *The Year's Best Science Fiction*

"As of today, it is clear that SCI FICTION is the best story 'zine on the Web."

–James Patrick Kelly, *Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*

"I...was struck by the high quality."

–Steve Sawicki, *Science Fiction Chronicle*

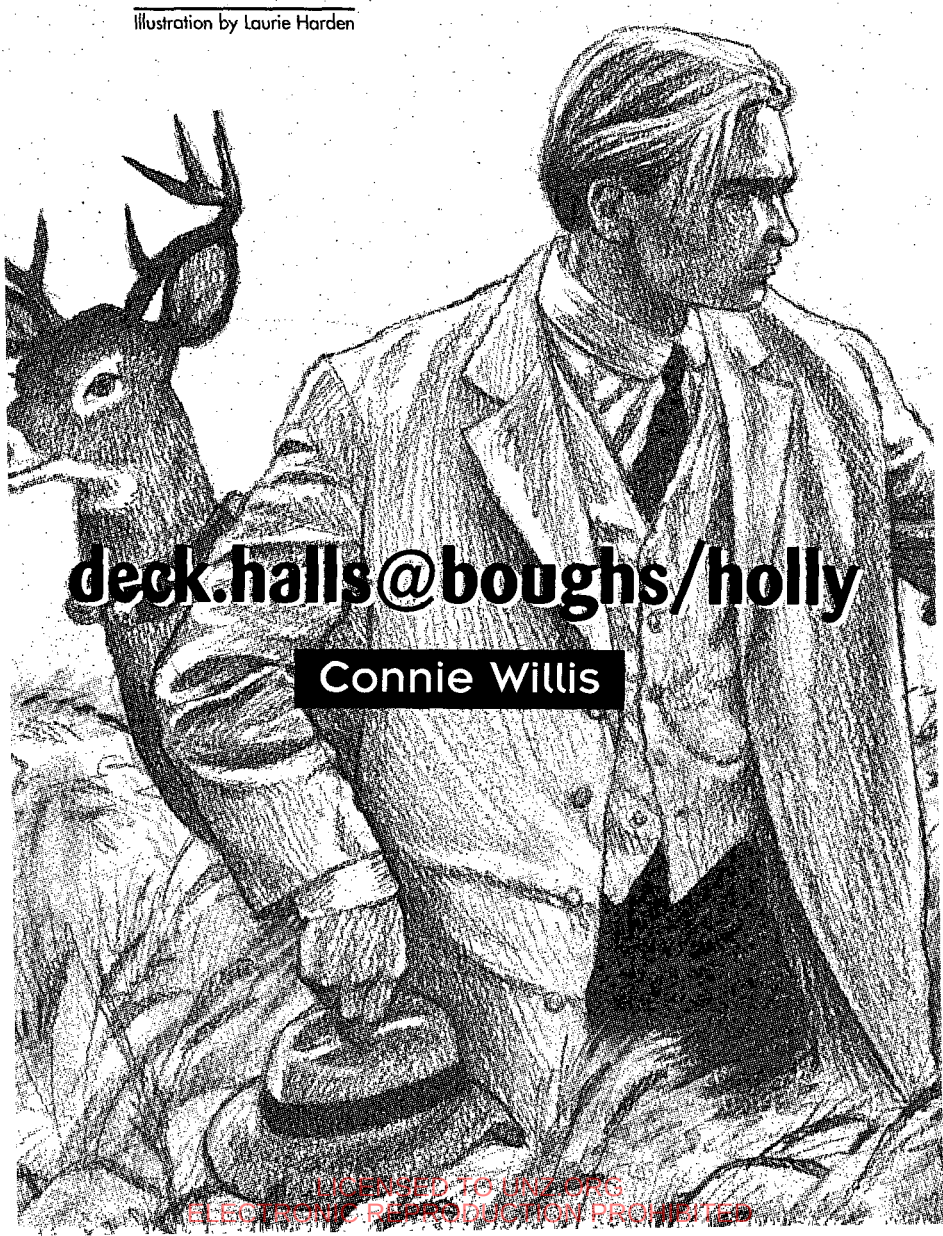
SCI FICTION

www.scifi.com/scifiction

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

We are delighted to have a new Christmas story by one of our perennially favorite authors. Connie Willis's most recent novel, *Passage* (Bantam Spectra), was recently published to rave reviews. Her latest book is the anthology *A Woman's Liberation*, co-edited with Sheila Williams, which is just out from Warner Aspect. It's a collection of stories by authors such as Ursula K. Le Guin, Anne McCaffrey, Octavia Butler, and Nancy Kress, that first appeared in *Asimov's* and *Analog*.

Illustration by Laurie Harden



deck.halls@boughs/holly

Connie Willis

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LICENSED TO USE ONLY
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

As soon as the nearly empty mag-lev pulled out of the station, Linny uplinked to Inge. "I need a netcheck on a Mrs. Shields," she said. "It's 3404 Aspen Lane, Greater Denver."

"Today?" Inge said. "It's Thanksgiving."

I didn't think they celebrated Thanksgiving in Norway, Linny thought, but Inge was obviously going somewhere. She was wearing a velvet slash top and sequined makeup. "I know, sorry, but I'm on my way to see a new client," Linny said. "You can wait on the financial, I just need some background so I have an idea of what she might like—occupation, hobbies, interests—"

"Right now?" Inge said plaintively. "I was hoping . . . see, the thing is, I told Carlo I'd have Thanksgiving dinner with him, and it's only a few minutes from now."

"Can't you be a little late?" Linny asked. "A background check should only take half an hour or so."

"*No*. Remember, he's at Tombaugh Station, and there's only a four-hour window, and personal calls don't have priority. I promised him I'd talk to him while they were having their dinner. They're on Canaveral time."

Linny'd forgotten Carlo was on the Moon. "Go have dinner," she said. "And tell Carlo happy Thanksgiving. I'll run a preliminary myself, and you can do a full netcheck later."

"Really? Thanks! I was afraid I wasn't going to make it," she said, though now that Linny'd given her permission, she didn't seem to be in all that much of a hurry. "Is Norwall taking you out for Thanksgiving dinner?" she asked.

"He has an installation," Linny said.

"So you aren't having Thanksgiving dinner with anybody?"

"I already had it with Mom."

"I thought she was in Riyaud."

"She is. We did it online earlier." In the middle of the night, actually, with Linny sitting half-asleep in front of the screen in her nightshift and the vidcam carefully focused so her mother couldn't see that all she was eating was a bowl of soyflakes.

Inge sniffed. "I still think Norwall could have taken you out. Carlo and I have more dates than you two, and he's 240,000 miles away. I know it's your busy season, but—"

"Are there any messages for me?" Linny cut in.

"Yes. Soothethesavagebeast.com are out of Beethovens. They wanted to know if Bachs would work. And the Standishes want you to do their e-cards after all."

Wonderful, Linny thought, but at least there weren't any messages from Pandora Freeh, which meant she was still happy with High School Memories. Now, if it just stayed that way till she could get there with the contract. Last year Pandora had changed her mind nine times, the last one the day before her installation, and this year they had already gone through Christmas in the Sahara, Board Games, and nine others before Linny had come up with a Christmas theme Pandora would stick with for more than two days. Now if she could just stick with it a couple of more hours while Linny interviewed Mrs. Shields—

"I'd better go," she told Inge. "I need to run that netcheck."

"And I—yipes! Look what time it is! I don't even have my eyes inked yet—" Inge said and abruptly downlinked.

Linny linked to soothethesavagebeast. It had a "Closed for Thanksgiving" banner on it. She connected to the netcheck site, typed in "Mrs. Shields" and requested a general background check and a marketing profile.

Nothing happened. "What did I forget to do?" she wondered. She hadn't done a netcheck in ages. Inge did all of them. She must have—

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The screen buzzed an override. It was Norwall, looking irritated.

"Where have you been?" he snapped. "I've been trying both you and Inge for forty-five minutes."

"I gave her the afternoon off. It's Thanksgiving, and—"

"Wonderful," he said. "Like everything else about this day. Teddy Lopez just called. They want to switch themes."

"Why? I thought he and Emil loved their jazz theme."

"They did, but they got *engaged,*" he said disgustedly.

"How nice—" Linny began.

"I'm glad *you* think so. Because now they want a whole new love design, hearts and Cupids and orange blossoms, and they want their installation moved up to the twelfth so they can have it for their engagement party."

"Goin'tothechapel.com has some darling diamond ring ornaments," Linny said, "and a glitteroptic tree would be the perfect—"

"Legally, I don't have to let them switch. They've already signed a contract. I have every right to hold them to it."

"But, Norwall, they just got engaged," Linny protested, "and it's Christmas."

"Don't remind me. I've got four installations to do in the next six days." His image leaned forward as if trying to see what was behind her. "I see movement. Where are you?"

"On the mag lev. I'm on my way out to Aspen Grove."

"Aspen Grove? Don't tell me Pandora Freeh still hasn't signed her contract. You let your clients walk all over you, Linny. You have to be firm with them. This is a business, not some sentimental—"

She'd heard this lecture before. "Pandora Freeh's signing her contract today."

"How long will it take? I could use you here at the installation to string lights for the outdoor tableau."

"I can't," she said. "I have to interview a client."

"Interview? Don't tell me you're taking on a new client? It's the twenty-eighth of November! Did you tell her the deadline for new clients is June?"

"She's never had a professional Christmas. She's always done her own, so she didn't know how it works."

"And you felt sorry for her?"

Linny nodded. "She was really desperate." And very insistent. Linny hadn't really had a chance to say no, but she couldn't tell that to Norwall. "It's a chance to broaden our client base. And I'm in good shape. Three of my installations are already done, and she doesn't need hers till after the fifteenth. I'll have no trouble fitting her in."

"Unless she keeps changing her mind like Pandora Freeh."

"She won't. She was terribly grateful that I could take her on—"

"Yes, and she'll probably tell all her friends that you're willing to take new clients in December. Who is she anyway? Have you run a financial check on her?"

"Yes," Linny said, even though she hadn't. But the fact that she lived in the same exclusive community as Pandora Freeh meant she was at least moderately rich, and this was her client, after all, not his, and if she turned out to be a lot of extra work, it was her problem.

"Well, don't leave without getting a signed contract. And why do you have to go all the way out there? Why couldn't you do it from your office?"

"She doesn't like talking to people online. She's not very knowledgeable about computers—"

"So you have to waste a whole day going out there, and I don't have anybody to string lights for me. If I'd known you were so far ahead you were in a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

position to take on new clients, you could have taken over some of my installations for me," he said and downlinked before she could wish him a happy Thanksgiving, which, under the circumstances, was probably just as well.

She tried to run the netcheck again. The screen buzzed an override immediately. It was Pandora Freeh. "Are you still coming out with the contract this afternoon?"

"Yes. At four."

"Oh, dear."

Oh, no. "Is there a problem?" Linny asked fearfully.

"I just got to thinking, there's no point in doing High School Memories if we can't get a bust of Shakespeare. English was my favorite class, and—"

"We have a bust," Linny said. "I've already ordered it."

"But what if it's different from the one in Mr. Spoonmaker's class? I just don't think I should sign until I've seen it."

So you want me to lug it all the way out to your house so you can look at it, Linny thought. "I don't know if the supplier's open today—" she said.

"Oh, there's no hurry. I can sign the contract next week."

By which time she would have come up with a dozen more objections. "Let me try them," she said.

She linked to Rock and a Hard Place, which was, thankfully, open till five, and then linked back to Pandora and changed their appointment to seven, which was still cutting it close. She'd have to make sure her interview with Mrs. Shields didn't last more than two hours, and then she'd have to go all the way back into town to get the bust, which the guy at Rock had said was too heavy for one person to carry. She'd have to call Norwall.

She relinked to him. "I know you're busy, but if you could just help me get it to the station, I could handle it from there." How she would manage the ten blocks to Pandora's house she wasn't sure, but maybe she could get a taxi.

"It's out of the question," he said. "I'll be here till midnight. If you'd had Pandora Freeh sign her contract right after the interview like I told you to, you wouldn't be in this mess. You're going to have to call this new client of yours and tell her you can't—"

"We're coming into the station. I've got to go," Linny said.

And I still don't have a netcheck, she thought, setting out on the walk to Mrs. Shields' house. Well, she'd just have to do without. Maybe she could pick up some hints from the house. She already knew Mrs. Shields was a technophobe, and, from her image on the screen when they talked, that she was in her late fifties and didn't dye her hair. That, and her use of the old-fashioned "Mrs." indicated she was pre-retro, so one of their traditional themes. Number 23 A Little House on the Prairie Christmas, maybe, or #119 Over the River and Through the Woods.

Here it was, 3404 Aspen Lane. The house wasn't as expensive-looking as she'd expected. She'd assumed that anything in Pandora Freeh's neighborhood would be in the hideous mansion category, but 3404 was a long, low-roofed house set well back from the street. Maybe she should have done a financial netcheck after all. But the wide lawn looked professionally groomed, and what furniture she could see through the wide front window looked like Mission-style Arts and Crafts.

The door didn't have any sensors or identity screen, just an old-fashioned doorbell. Linny rang it, and after a minute a tall young man in a wool pullover with a napkin stuck in the neck opened it. "Can I help you?" he asked, frowning.

"I'm Linny Chiang," she said. "I have an appointment with—"

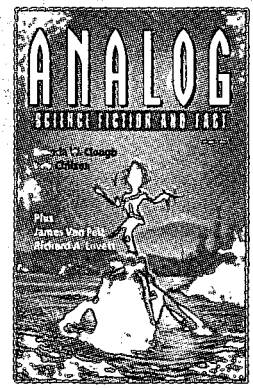
"Come in, come in! Brian, don't make her stand outside like that!" Mrs.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

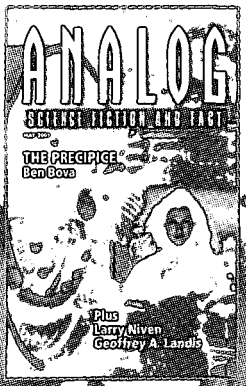
TOUR THE UNIVERSE

Just $6.95!

Save 60%



Explore the boundaries of imagination with the Analog Science Fiction Value Pack. You get five of our most popular back issues for just $6.95 plus shipping. That's a savings of 60% off the regular price!



Complete the order form below and mail it back to us with your payment

PENNY MARKETING

Dept. SM-100, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855-1220

☑ YES! Please send me my **Analog Science Fiction Value Pack.** I get 5 back issues for just $6.95 plus $2 shipping and handling ($8.95 per pack, U.S. funds). **My satisfaction is fully guaranteed!** My payment of $ _____ is enclosed.
(AFPK05)

Name: _____
(Please print)

Address: _____

City: _____

State: _____ **ZIP:** _____

Please make checks payable to Penny Marketing. Allow 8 weeks for delivery. Magazines are back issues shipped together in one package. To keep prices low we cannot make custom orders. Add $4 additional postage for delivery outside the U.S.A. Offer expires 12/31/02. 121C-NANVL1

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Shields pushed in front of the young man and practically dragged Linny into the house. "It's freezing out!"

She had a napkin, too, in her hand. "Am I interrupting your Thanksgiving dinner?" Linny asked anxiously.

"Oh, no, not at all, we'd finished," she said with a pointed look at Brian, who was still frowning. "Brian, take her coat," she said, wrestling Linny out of it and handing it to him, "and go turn on the fire in the study."

Brian left, bearing the coat. "The handsome young man is my nephew, Brian West," Mrs. Shields said. "We're both so grateful you agreed to give up your Thanksgiving to come do this. Have you had dinner? Would you like some turkey and dressing? My nephew makes wonderful oyster dressing."

"No, thank you. I had dinner earlier."

"With your family?" she said, leading Linny through the living room to the study.

"My mother and I had dinner on-line. She's in Riyaud."

"But you must have had to eat in the middle of the night."

Linny was surprised Ms. Shields knew what time zone Riyaud was in. Even her mother hadn't had it straight. "It must be late there for you, darling," she'd kept saying. "What is it? Nine o'clock?"

"Have you had anything to eat since then?" Ms. Shields was asking anxiously. "There's cranberry sauce and candied yams and—"

"No, thanks, really, I had something to eat on the mag-lev," she lied.

"Some chai then, or what is it you young people drink nowadays? Maxpresso? Red tea?"

Linny could see the onslaught wasn't going to stop until she'd agreed to eat or drink something. "Chai would be nice," she said, and Mrs. Shields bustled out of the room.

Linny looked around. Mission-style furniture in here, too, and from the looks of it, genuine Stickley, and the carpet, though worn, was an antique Navajo. She revised her financial estimate considerably upward. No knickknacks, though, to give a clue as to a possible theme—no stuffed unicorns or tribal masks or model biplanes. And no signs of a pet, which was too bad. Pets were easy. All you did was link to notacreaturewasstirring.com, type in the breed, and they supplied everything: ornaments, be-ribboned Milkbones, even a rom of dog or cat carols.

There weren't any holos either, just an oil painting of a bridge above the fireplace. Bridges of the World? Golden Gate ornaments and a covered bridge diorama for the outdoor tableau? Or maybe Mrs. Shields was interested in painting, or a particular artist. Linny leaned forward to look at the signature.

"My nephew Brian does bridges," Mrs. Shields said, bustling back in. "He's an engineer. I'll bet you two are the same age." She handed Linny a mug of chai. "He's twenty-eight." She waited expectantly.

"I'm twenty-seven," Linny said. "Did you want to do the interview in here?"

"Yes. Do you need to hook anything up or plug anything in? I'm afraid I'm a complete ignoramus when it comes to computers, and Brian isn't much better."

"No, I'm all set," Linny said, opening her notebook and switching it on, but Mrs. Shields was already calling, "Brian! Brian!"

He came in. "This is Miss Chiang, our new Christmas designer," she said.

"Christmas designer?" he said, with a puzzled look at his aunt.

"Yes." Mrs. Shields smiled at him and then looked back at Linny. "I've always done my own Christmases, but this year I decided it was all too much for me, and I was going to have a professional Christmas."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You did," he said.

He clearly disapproved. Linny had seen this kind of resistance before, the men in the family wanting to keep Christmas the way it had been, which meant the women did all the work.

"Christmas requires much more planning and work than it used to," She said. "Shopping, decorating, cleaning, baking, wrapping gifts, sending e-cards. It's impossible for one person to do it all, and even if they somehow manage to, they're far too stressed and exhausted to enjoy the holidays."

"Exactly," Mrs. Shields said, looking at Brian. "I want to *enjoy* my Christmas, and this young woman is going to help me do just that, so it's no use your trying to talk me out of it, Brian. I've made up my mind. Why don't you show us what you have in mind, Ms. Chiang?"

"It's what *you* have in mind that's important," Linny said, setting up the portable holo projector, "deck.halls tailors Christmas to your wishes. We have over seven hundred holiday themes to choose from, and if you don't see the theme you want, we can custom-design one for you. Did you have anything in mind?"

"Oh, yes, I'd say she definitely has something in mind," Brian said.

Linny looked inquiringly at Mrs. Shields.

"I really don't know," Mrs. Shields said. "Our Christmases have always been very simple, just a tree and stockings hung by the fireplace."

"Right, nothing fancy," the nephew said.

"Well, then let me show you something simple."

"Oh, no, I want to see *all* of your ideas. If I'm going to do a professional Christmas, I might as well go all the way."

"All right, let me begin by outlining the services we offer," Linny said, giving Mrs. Shields a handheld. "So you can jot down the numbers of themes that you like. We offer a full range of services. Decorating, lighting, gift-wrapping, shopping—"

"Shopping?" Brian said, sounding shocked.

"Yes, by client list or using marketing profiles. We can also do your Christmas cards, e- or v-mail with full graphics, or handwritten, and party invitations. We can also arrange for caroling. You pick the services you want."

She printed out two price lists and handed the pages to them. Neither one did more than glance at it. She revised her financial estimate upward again. "Now let me show you some possibilities. This is #68, Winter Wonderland," she said, typing in the code.

A full-color hologram of a stairway entwined with darting white and silver lights filled an all-white room. The diamond-flocked tree at the foot of the stairs was hung with white velvet angelknots, and crystal snowflakes filled the air. "The snowflakes are Waterford, and the diamonds are each an eighth of a carat.

"Or if you prefer something less formal, we have #241 Christmas at Loch Ness." The white room changed to one done in red and green Scotch plaid. A large bush of purple heather stood between the plaid couch and the plaid chair, hung with tam o'shanters, thistles, and sea serpents. "The furniture, draperies, and carpet are available in the full slate of clan tartans," Linny said.

"Some people plan their Christmases around a hobby—" she clicked to #110 A Crossword Puzzle Christmas, done all in black-and-white squares, "or a political affiliation. This one is called, 'Elephants Never Forget,' " she said, showing them a holo of a room draped in red-white-and-blue bunting punctuated with G)P symbols. The red tree was covered in U.S. flags and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

models of the White House, and on its top was a replica of Mt. Rushmore with Reagan's face, Newt Gingrich's, and those of all three Bushes.

"You have to be kidding," the nephew said.

"There's of course a Democrat version," she said, and when Mrs. Shields didn't look enthusiastic, "and our Globalization Christmas: It's a Small World After All." Mrs. Shields still didn't look impressed.

"Most clients choose a Christmas that reflects their occupation," Linny said, wishing she had a bridge theme to show them, "or some personal interest. Their favorite flower—" she called up #301 Tiptoe through the Tulips, "—or a favorite color." The room turned purple. "This is our Mauve Melody." The room went yellow-green. "And this is #116, Cantata in Chartreuse. Or you could plan it around a family memory, or an upcoming event. Two of my partner's clients just got engaged, so their theme is the engagement, with hearts and Cupids."

"How nice," Mrs. Shields said, and to her nephew, "How does something like that sound?"

"We have several love-related themes—Moonlight and Roses," Linny said, clicking them into the center of the room, "Romeo and Juliet, Harlequin Romance—"

"Which one did you have when you got engaged?" Mrs. Shields asked.

"Me?" Linny said. "Oh, I'm not engaged."

"Oh, when you said your partner, I assumed—"

"Oh, no, I was referring to my business partner, Norwall Harding."

"And he's not your boyfriend?" Mrs. Shields persisted.

Boyfriend, Linny thought. Definitely pre-retro. "No, I mean, yes, I mean, we date. . . ."

"But you're not engaged," Mrs. Shields said. "Brian's not engaged either. He says he just doesn't meet anyone. Will he be working with you on the Christmas?"

"Brian?"

"No, your partner."

"No, we each have our own clients."

"But you share office space."

Definitely pre-retro. "We don't have an office, per se. Everything's done by wireless or internet except for installations. Our secretary Inge lives in Oslo."

"And your partner?"

"He lives here," she said, "though we hardly ever see each other," and added silently, not even on Thanksgiving.

"Oslo," Mrs. Shields said. "I've always wanted to go to Scandinavia. Do you have some sort of Scandinavian theme?"

"Oh, yes," Linny said, clicking back to the main menu. "We have several: Santa Lucia's Day; Christmas in Norway; Christmas in Sweden; Wonderful, Wonderful Copenhagen. Or we can do a specific city, with holos of the local sights, and regional foods: lutefisk, pancakes with lingonberries, blood pudding."

"Oh, you do food, too," Mrs. Shields said, and Brian shook his head, as if in disgust.

"The standard package includes a thematic Christmas dinner," Linny said, printing out a list of caterers and sample menus, "but we also do Christmas Eve suppers, parties, buffets. Would you like to see our Christmas on the Fjords?"

Mrs. Shields shook her head. "I've never liked herring. What other places do you have?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Anywhere on-planet or off. We have a complete line of outer space themes—both Moonbases, Mars, the solar system, with or without Pluto—as well as every country and all major cities: London, New Delhi, Paris," she said, clicking onto one after the other, "Las Vegas—"

The Eiffel Tower changed to a wedding chapel with flashing neon signs, slot machines, and an Elvis impersonator conducting a wedding between Santa Claus and a showgirl with a pink ostrich feather tail. "We also do fictional places," she said.

"As if Las Vegas wasn't fictional enough," the nephew said.

Linny ignored him. "Neverneverland," she said, clicking, "Middle Earth, Atlantis, Hogwarts. And historical sites: Gettysburg, Waterloo, Saigon. Deck.halls has a full line of historical themes, both events and people: Cleopatra, General Patton, Bill Gates—"

"Dolly Levi," Brian said.

"From *Hello, Dolly?*" Linny said, glad she recognized the allusion. She pulled up the theater menu. "We have a complete line of Broadway, movie, and TV themes. *Les Mis, Star Wars: Episode Nine, The Iceman Cometh, Cats*." She clicked to *Hello, Dolly*. "As you can see, the tree is decorated with hats from Irene Molloy's millinery shop, the dining room is done as Harmonia Gardens, and in front of the house," she clicked on Lawn Decorations, "are a greater-than-life-size full-action Barbra Streisand and Louis Armstrong performing the title song."

Mrs. Shields was shaking her head at Brian.

"We also have Carol Channing, if you don't like Barbra Streisand," Linny said. "Or Britney Spears and the rest of the cast from the revival."

"It's not the cast. It's just that *Hello, Dolly* doesn't—"

"Have anything at all to do with Christmas?" Brian put in.

"Well, yes," Mrs. Shields said reluctantly. "I know people don't want the same old themes every year, that they want something new and different, but—"

"We also have a large assortment of conventional Christmas packages: A Nutcracker Christmas, The Twelve Days of Christmas, Silver Bells, How the Grinch Stole Christmas," she said, looking at Brian, "or if you prefer a religious theme," she clicked to a new menu, "we have No Room at the Inn, We Three Kings, Angels We Have Heard on High, and a full range of Hanukkah, Ramadan, Winter Solstice, and Kwanzaa themes. Or there's our historical line: Medieval Christmas, an Edwardian Christmas, A Naughty Nineties Christmas—"

"Oh, that's nice," Mrs. Shields said, looking at the tree hung with cell phones and palm pilots. "Young people had so many opportunities to meet someone back in the nineties—chat rooms, personals ads, online dating services. They had all sorts of ways of getting to know each other. Nowadays they don't even work together. They sit in tiny little cubicles staring at an image on a screen and talking into a headset. It's just like that story by—you know who I mean, Brian, he wrote it years and years ago—that author you like, not H.G. Wells, the other one."

"Isaac Asimov?" Brian ventured.

"No, the *other* one. About the future where everyone stays inside and communicates by computer, only they didn't have computers back then, and no one goes *any*where or meets *any*one face to face. Oh, what is it called?"

"'The Machine Stops'" Linny said, and they both looked at her in surprise. "By E.M. Forster."

"That's the one," Mrs. Shields said delightedly. "You're an E.M. Forster fan?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I did an E.M. Forster Christmas for the Ledbetters two years ago."

"An E.M. Forster Christmas. Oh, I can see it now," Brian said sarcastically. "In the living room, a holo of the bookcase falling on Leonard Bast and out on the front lawn," he spread his arms to illustrate, "a tableau of the *Where Angels Fear to Tread* carriage tipping over and killing the baby."

"No, of course not," Linny said indignantly. "It was the kissing scene from *A Room with a View*."

"Where George kisses Lucy in the barley field?" Mrs. Shields said. "Oh, I love that scene, the way he takes her in his arms and kisses her, without so much as a word. How did you manage a barley field at Christmastime?"

"Magicarpet does wonderful grain field mats," Linny said. "Their corn is especially nice. I used that for A Rodgers and Hammerstein Christmas last year. They also do very nice poppies."

"For An Opium Addict's Christmas," Brian said.

"I remember there were poppies in the barley field," Mrs. Shields said. "I love the way she just stands there waiting while he strides toward her."

"An E.M. Forster Christmas would be perfect for your house," Linny said, thinking, if I could do the E.M. Forster again, it would be perfect. I know exactly where to get the costumes and the holo of Florence. "Your living room window provides an excellent view—" she said.

But Mrs. Shields was shaking her head again. "It sounds lovely, but this first time I think I'd like to have something more . . . Christmasy.

"Certainly," Linny said, thinking, I am going to have to show her every single design I have. "Here's a very nice Currier and Ives Christmas. Or a Child's Christmas in Wales," she said, clicking rapidly through the holos, "Christmas with the Cratchits, Christmas with the Waltons, Christmas with the Cleavers, Christmas in Manhattan—That one's really fun. Empire State Building and Statue of Liberty ornaments, and a yard display of the Rockettes *and* a full-sized balloon from Macy's parade."

"Oh, my," Mrs. Shields said. "Don't you have something more . . . traditional?"

"Of course," Linny said, clicking to the Christmas Past menu. "We have a Victorian Christmas, a Williamsburg Christmas," she said, showing holos of them in quick succession, "A Gone with the Wind Christmas, a Renaissance Christmas. Did you have any particular historical period in mind? Your house would be ideal for our Roaring Twenties Christmas. Bathtub gin, raccoon coats—"

"Zelda and Scott Fitzgerald passed out on the front lawn," the nephew put in.

Linny glared at him. "We can do a specific year if you like, or a specific date. I did a really fun 2001 Christmas several years ago—Millennium fireworks, Stanley Kubrick ornaments, an XFL yard tableau—"

The nephew grinned and started to make another smart remark.

"Or a favorite decade," Linny said quickly. "Here's one you might like." She clicked to A Retro Christmas. "The tree's aluminum with an authentic rotating colored light."

"Oh, my grandmother had one of those," Mrs. Shields said, and Linny began to get her hopes up again, but Mrs. Shields didn't want that one either.

"Maybe something more modern," she said questioningly, so Linny went through Christmas by Laserlight, Christmas on the Space Station, A Cloned Christmas, a Nanotech Christmas, all to no avail.

"I just don't know . . . they all seem so fancy . . . and as you can see, I like to keep it simple. Maybe something to do with nature?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Linny sneaked a look at the time. Nearly four. She was going to have to leave if she wanted to get to the statuary warehouse before it closed.

"I'm keeping you, aren't I?" Mrs. Shields said and looked at her own watch. "Oh, my goodness, it's nearly suppertime. You'll stay for supper, won't you?"

"I'm afraid I can't. I have an appointment—"

"And you need me to make up my mind," Mrs. Shields said, flustered. "Do I have to do it today? I just can't seem . . ."

"No, of course not," Linny said, thinking, Norwall will have a fit. "Why don't I leave a rom with you? You can look through the themes at your leisure, and when you decide, or if you have any questions, you can get in touch with me." She called up her card, added her address, and printed one out. "This is my office at home, but I'm hardly ever there. I spend most of my time onsite, supervising installations. v-mail is your best bet. I recommend the Retro Christmas. It's very classic." She turned to Brian. "If I could just get my coat."

"Oh, surely you can stay for a quick supper," Mrs. Shields said. "It will only take a moment. Turkey sandwiches and pie."

"No, really, I have to catch the mag-lev—"

"Brian can take you," she said. "He'd be delighted."

He didn't look delighted.

"No, really, I have several errands to run on the way home. I have to pick up something and then—"

"All the more reason, then. You can't carry a bunch of packages on the mag-lev—"

"I don't want to put Mr. West out," Linny said uncomfortably. One of the places I need to go to is clear on the east side of Greater Denver—"

"Then you can't possibly take the mag-lev. Brian can take you right to the door, can't you, Brian?" Mrs. Shields said, not giving him a chance to answer. She produced a set of car keys, their coats, and, in spite of Linny's protests, a turkey sandwich, and bundled them into the car, which was Ferrari's new fusion-cell Incite. Linny revised her financial estimate upward again.

"Just tell him where you need to go," Mrs. Shields said, pushing down the door.

"I still don't think I should impose on—"

"You're not imposing. Brian's *happy* to take you, and this will give the two of you a chance to talk," she said and waved them out of the driveway.

"Where to?" he asked.

"Look, I know your aunt meant well, but I don't want to ruin your Thanksgiving. Why don't you just take me to the station?"

"You're not the one ruining my Thanksgiving," he said. "Where to?"

She gave him the directions to the statuary warehouse. He made no move to enter the directions into the Incite's computer or even to put the controls on drive-assist, which was a clear sign he didn't want to talk, so Linny didn't say anything either till they got to Bowles. "You take a left here. Rock and a Hard Place is six blocks down on the right. There's a sign out front that says, 'Statuary and Stonework.'"

"So what are you picking up? Tombstones for #257 Christmas in the Cemetery?"

"You don't approve of what I do, do you?" she asked.

"I just don't see what crossword puzzles and tombstones have to do with Christmas."

"It's not a tombstone. It's a bust of Shakespeare."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"For A Classics Christmas? Silas Marner ornaments and a Jude the Obscure lawn display? Why can't you do something *connected* to Christmas?"

"Like mistletoe?" she asked. "Which was co-opted from the Druids? Nearly everything we associate with Christmas was tacked on after the fact. The Yule log was lifted from the Druids, too, Christmas trees *and* presents were co-opted from the Roman Saturnalia. Even Santa's sleigh and flying reindeer were stolen from Norse mythology."

"But there's still a connection, no matter how tenuous. Unlike Atlantis. And Coca-Cola ornaments."

"Like Christmas cards, you mean?" she said. "They were invented in 1843 to advertise a publishing company. People have been complaining about the commercialization of Christmas since back in E.M. Forster's day."

They were in front of Rock and a Hard Place. Brian and Linny got out and went into the warehouse. Statues and busts stood everywhere: Ben Franklin and Winnie the Pooh and Patsy Ramsey. Linny stepped among a flock of stone sheep to the counter and typed her name and order into the computer.

"I just think the celebration of Christmas should retain some connection to the original meaning," he said, draping his arm over a statue of a very young Angelina Jolie.

"Which is?"

"Good will toward men. Kindness, sharing, forgiveness, love."

A robo-dolly brought the bust of Shakespeare up. "Follow me," Linny said and led it out to the car. The dolly loaded it into the back seat, and Brian strapped the bust in.

"Things like good will and family and being together can't be captured in #194 Ferns of the Mesozoic," he said.

"They can't be captured in stockings hung by the chimney with care either. The tree, the candles—"

"The Elvis impersonator—"

"Are all just trappings," she said. "They don't affect the spirit of Christmas. Most of the people I do installations for hire me so they can spend more time with their loved ones, so they're not run so ragged by shopping and cooking and decorating that they're screaming at everyone."

"That does not explain Christmas #265 Keeping Up with the Joneses."

Like Pandora Freeh, she thought. "People have always wanted to impress their neighbors. And they've always made things bigger and fancier than they needed to be, from their clothes to their houses. To their cars," she added pointedly.

He grinned. "Where would you like my *car* to go next?"

"Back to Aspen Grove."

"What for?" he said sharply.

"Not to your aunt's. To Ms. Freeh's." She gave the address. "I'm sorry you had to come all this way in and back—"

"I told you, it's no imposition." He started the car. "I suppose you're right about people overdoing things," he said when they were back on the highway. "Look at the Tower of Babel. It wasn't enough to build a skyscraper, they had to build a tower right up to heaven—No, don't tell me," he said at her expression. "You have a Tower of Babel Christmas."

"Number 605. It's part of our Evangelical line," she admitted. "We also have Noah's Ark, Daniel in the Lion's Den, and the Battle of Armageddon."

"Which is #666, no doubt."

She laughed. "I know a lot of them are silly, but they're what people want.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

My job is to try to make Christmas as happy and stress-free as I can for my clients. Surely that's in the Christmas spirit."

It seemed to take no time at all to get to Pandora's, which was good because it was nearly seven. She would never have made it on the mag-lev.

"What's her theme?" Brian asked when they pulled up in front of Pandora's mansion. "A Forbes 500 Christmas?"

"No, High School Memories. If this bust is the right one." She pressed the door sensor.

"Who shall I say is calling?" it asked.

"Linny Chiang," she said, pressing her hand to the ID pad.

"And her delivery boy," Brian said.

The door opened, and they went in. Linny began looking around for a place for Brian to set the bust down, but before they could, Pandora Freeh was upon them, crying out, "Oh, what a pity you brought it all this way!"

"It's not the same Shakespeare?" Linny asked.

"No, it *is!* It looks exactly like the one in Mr. Spoonmaker's class, right down to the nick in his beard. Oh, I can't even look at it!" she said, waving Brian away.

"Should I take it back out to the car?" he whispered to Linny.

She shook her head. "But if it's perfect, Pandora, why—?"

Ms. Freeh ignored her. "I knew it was such a good theme someone was bound to steal it, and now we're going to have to come up with a completely new theme!"

Linny's heart sank. "Someone else is doing a high school memories theme?"

"They might as well be," Pandora said, flouncing down on the couch. "Joan and Claudette Proudell are doing Rah! Rah! Sis Boom Bah!"

Linny didn't dare look at Brian. "Rah, rah, sis boom bah?"

"Yes, their entire house," she flung her arm out, "is being decorated in pom poms, megaphones, and holos of girls in pleated skirts doing the splits—"

"Oh," Linny said, finally understanding. "And you think that will take away from the basketball holo you intended to have in the living room. But we can change that to something else. A holo of typing class, or the lunch room."

"Lunch room?" Pandora shuddered. "Nobody has happy memories of their high school lunch room. I was going to have the league championship game right before the final buzzer, with the crowd roaring and the cheerleaders leaping into the air," she explained to Brian, who was still holding the bust of Shakespeare.

"This is Brian, by the way," Linny said, leading him over to an end table where he could set it down. "His aunt is having her Christmas done for the first time. She lives near you."

"Really, what's her name?"

"Shields," Brian said reluctantly, and who could blame him?

Pandora waved her hand in a dismissive gesture that meant she didn't know her, which was surprising. From the number of friends and relatives Pandora cited when she was changing her mind, Linny assumed she knew everybody in a thousand-mile radius.

"Well, tell her to make *sure* no one else is doing the same theme before she signs her contract," Pandora said, "so she doesn't have to change it and start all over again a month from Christmas the way I am."

"Oh, I'm sure that won't be necessary," Linny said, trying not to sound as desperate as she felt. She had already ordered all the glassware and the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

black rubber aprons for the chemistry lab and the prom ornaments and disco ball for the tree.

"What if we changed it from a memories theme to a modern high school?" she said. "They don't have cheerleaders, and we could add girls' bocci ball and KI and virtual learning labs, and your bust of Shakespeare could—"

"They don't even *teach* Shakespeare in today's high schools," Pandora sniffed. "And I won't do a Christmas theme without it. No, it's going to have to be something completely different. Joan and Claudette have ruined it. I don't even want to think about high schools anymore. So," she said brightly, "what do you suggest?" She clasped her hands and looked up expectantly at Linny.

"I . . ." Oh, my God. Something with a bust of Shakespeare. Christmas in Stratford-on-Avon? No, she knew of at least two other Christmas designers who'd done it. Famous People Who've Been Cut Off Just Below the Shoulders?

"You know," Brian said, "this bust of Shakespeare just gave me an idea. Your theme could be a Shakespearean play."

"Grimshaw Powell's ex already did *Macbeth* two years ago," Pandora said.

"No, I was thinking a Christmas play. We were just talking," he said, nodding at Linny, "about how so many Christmas themes aren't really related to Christmas at all."

Like High School Memories, Linny thought, but Pandora didn't look at all offended. "I didn't know Shakespeare wrote any Christmas plays," she said.

I didn't either, Linny thought.

"Oh, yes," Brian said. "It's called *Twelfth Night,* and it was meant to be performed during the Christmas season, on Epiphany. It would be perfect for a theme—it's got a shipwreck and . . ."

"A palace," Linny said, coming to his aid, "and gorgeous velvet and satin costumes—"

"And cross-gartering," Brian said.

"Cross-gartering?" Pandora said doubtfully.

"'I will be strange, stout, in yellow stockings and cross-gartered,'" he quoted, "and there are rings and love notes and disguises and romance. 'If music be the food of love, play on—'"

"And your bust of Shakespeare will fit right in," Linny put in.

"And I'm sure no one's ever done it before," Brian added.

"I don't doubt that," Pandora said, frowning. "But do you think it's well-known enough? I've never even heard of it. What if people don't recognize it?"

"That is a consideration," Brian said, and Linny wondered whether he was deliberately trying to undermine what he'd just suggested. "It certainly has more substance than Rah! Rah! Sis boom bah!"

Pandora looked delighted. "I hate frivolous themes," she said, "and, as you say, it's directly related to Christmas. Cheerleading has *nothing* at all to do with Christmas."

"Exactly," they both said.

"And I wouldn't have to give up my bust of Shakespeare."

"It could be right in the entry hall," Linny said, and Brian promptly picked it up and carried it in, "where it would be the first thing your guests would see."

"I *love* it!" Pandora said, clasping her hands under her chin. "*Twelfth Night* it is."

"You're a genius," Linny said on their way out to the car. "Have you ever considered being a Christmas designer?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"God forbid," he said, popping the doors. "I just didn't want to carry that thing back to the tombstone store. I hope I didn't let you in for too much work."

"Are you kidding?" Linny said, getting in. "The other theme she was considering before she decided on High School Memories was whaling."

He laughed. "All right, where to next?"

"Just the mag-lev station, thanks," she said. "That was my last errand, and there's no point in your driving me all the way back into town. You're only a few blocks from your aunt's."

"I like to show off my overly Tower of Babel-like car," he said and pulled out into the street.

"No, really," she protested, "you've already done enough by suggesting *Twelfth Night*. It's an inspired theme. I'll do the dining room as Maria's kitchen and the living room as Olivia's garden, and for an outdoor tableau . . . sorry," she said when she saw he was looking at her. "I get a little carried away."

"You really like doing this stuff, don't you?"

"It's fun," she said, "doing research—I get to find out about so many different things—"

"Like E.M. Forster."

She nodded. "Most jobs are so narrowly focused these days. And I love taking an idea and thinking how it can be adapted to lights and tree decorations. You do the same thing, I suppose, with your bridges?"

"Bridges?" he said blankly.

"Your aunt told me you were an engineer, and I assumed you built bridges."

"Oh. No," he said, frowning. "Dams. I build dams."

"Oh, but I mean, seeing where the water needs to go and then translating that into blueprints and then concrete. It must be the same kind of thing."

"What's the hardest Christmas you've ever had to design?" he asked.

"Gum Disease," she said promptly. "It was for this oral surgeon. The most fun one was the one I did for an ex-stripper named Bubbles O'Halloran. Her theme was—"

"Let me guess. Bubbles?"

She nodded. "I had bubble lights and a bubble machine and bubble gum and bubble wrap and those bubble dresses from the 1960s—"

"What, no champagne?"

"No, but for the outdoor tableau I had an animated Don Ho singing 'Tiny Bubbles.'"

They chatted the rest of the way home, him asking her about the best Christmas she'd ever designed and the easiest and the craziest. He was still driving the Incite on his own, only occasionally glancing sideways at her, and she was grateful it wasn't on comp-drive because it was already awfully cozy in the darkened car.

She was hardly ever this close to anyone in person—she couldn't remember the last time she and Norwall had sat side by side—and looking at someone's image on a screen just wasn't the same thing. For one thing, there was the scent. Brian smelled faintly of soap and aftershave and sweat. And video images, even high-definition, didn't pick up details like the fine hairs on the backs of his hands as he gripped the steering wheel.

Mrs. Shields had a point about people spending too much time alone staring at a screen. She was proof of it. The mere presence of another person was turning her into one of Pandora's giddy cheerleaders.

He had pulled onto her block. "The corner's fine," she said.

"I don't suppose you'd have time to grab a pita or a cone of red tea—"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You're kidding, right?" she said.

"No, I—too busy, huh?"

"Busy isn't even the word. Hysterical. The busy season's from January through April, when we do our prelim plans and put in orders. From then on it's chaos. And now I have to completely redo Pandora's financial estimate and décor plan. I don't have time to breathe, let alone sit down and have a—" She realized suddenly how ungracious she sounded, "—but thank you for asking me. And *thank* you for talking Pandora into *Twelfth Night*. If it were any other time—"

"Except January through December," he said. "I could take you back to Rock and a Hard Place so you can order Patience on a monument."

"That's okay, I'll order it online," she said, laughing. She got out of the car and leaned in. "I really wish I could."

"It's okay. You need to go order fake mustaches, and I need to go talk to my aunt. I have a few things I want to discuss with her," he said grimly.

"You're not still trying to talk her out of a professional Christmas, are you?"

"No, definitely not. I was thinking of #941 A Dam Christmas. What do you think?" he said, and smelled so good as he said it that she almost said, yes, she'd go for a cone of tea.

It was a good thing she didn't, though, because she had 226 incomings, nineteen of them emergency override messages. The Ledbetters needed their installation moved up to the fourteenth, Jack and Jill Halsey needed theirs moved back to the eighth, The Hanging Tree was out of otter candles and wanted to know if wolverines would work. Stitch in Time wanted to know whether she wanted walnut brown, espresso, or sludge.

There was an animated e-message from cyberfloral wishing her a happy Thanksgiving and another one from Online Medical Supplies. "For That Unique Christmas Theme."

Careen Everett wanted to change from a vegetarian Christmas Eve buffet to a sit-down vegan dinner. Oppie Harper-Groves wanted to change from Rottweilers to Skye terriers. The Throckmortons wanted to change from .24 caliber to nine millimeter.

Surprisingly, there were no messages from Pandora Freeh. It usually took her about ten minutes to find something wrong with Linny's proposals. She must have really been impressed with Brian's idea.

Linny had been, too. It wasn't often you met somebody who read Shakespeare's comedies *and* E.M. Forster novels. It wasn't often you met anyone, period. Mrs. Shields was right. There were very few romantic opportunities these days. The only other people besides Norwall she ever saw were the guys from FedXUPS and deliveries.com, and the only thing they ever said was, stolidly, "I don't know anything about that. All I got is these two boxes," and even if she, inconceivably, had wanted to go out with one of them, when exactly would she find the time to do that? Before she'd even finished reading through her messages, seventeen more had come in.

Linny read through the other two hundred and twenty and then moved the Emory installation and v-mailed the Niedmores to see if she could shift theirs to the thirteenth so the Ledbetters could have the fourteenth. She v-mailed alfalfa.com for possible vegan menus, decided on a brown (soy sauce), did a global otter candle search, ordered Skye terrier ornaments from Dog Depot, critturama.com and the Spot Spot, and then called Norwall.

He didn't answer (a bad sign) but when she checked her v-mail, there weren't any messages from him (a good sign), and none from Mrs. Shields,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

deciding on a theme. There was, however, one from Pandora. She had known it was too good to be true.

"*Twelfth Night* isn't an R, is it?" a message so incomprehensible that even though it was after eleven, she called Pandora back.

"I remembered your young man said something about garters, and Charmaine Kagasaki's ex's children are going to be here," she said. "You aren't planning anything with lingerie, are you?"

"Cross-gartering doesn't have anything to do with lingerie," Linny said firmly. "They're ribbons. Yellow ribbons."

"Erna Bunrath's designer is doing a wonderful Iran hostage crisis," Pandora said. "Maybe a political theme—"

"It wouldn't have your bust of Shakespeare," Linny pointed out, "which I assure you is the centerpiece of your theme."

"Really?" she said, pleased.

"Absolutely. I've been thinking, maybe instead of the entry hall, it should be in the living room, in a sort of specially-built niche—"

They spent the next hour and a half discussing the optimum location for the bust of Shakespeare, but at least at the end of it, Pandora sounded definitely committed to *Twelfth Night*. Even better, after Linny v-mailed her her proposal three days later, there were only two overrides from her, and they were both about the buffet. "I like your 'if music be the food of love, play on' idea, but I think trumpets would make a nicer centerpiece than a violin," and "Primula Outridge's new live-in is allergic to strawberries."

The thirteenth, however, would not work for the Niedmores. They could do either the tenth or the eighteenth, both of which were booked. Soy sauce was unavailable, and sludge was back-ordered till March eighth. Linny mentally rolled up her sleeves and got to work. She called Wang Ho to see if *he'd* be willing to have his installation on the thirteenth and then checked for messages from Mrs. Shields.

Still nothing. She was going to have to help her. She v-mailed Inge and asked her if she'd finished the netcheck yet.

"Sorry, no," Inge said. "I forgot all about it, I was so swamped after Thanksgiving. By the way, *thank* you for letting me take it off. Carlo was really homesick. The food they have up there is *terrible*. I'll get right on that netcheck."

"Great," Linny said, and then, curiously, "How did you meet Carlo?"

"My sister fixed us up," she said. "Did you decide which cookies you wanted for the Tornado Christmas Afternoon Tea?"

Linny hadn't. She picked them (chocolate swirls and mincemeat bars), checked the measurements of the Fanworthys' dining room for their rodeo holo, and then got busy on the Mannings' installation, which was on the eighth and which took every waking moment till then to get ready. She didn't even have time to answer her incomings, except for Brian's. He had called her twice, once to tell her his aunt had decided against the catering package, and again to tell her she'd narrowed it down to six themes. "None of which, I am happy to say, is #332 A Harley-Davidson Christmas."

Inge still hadn't gotten the netcheck to her, but it was just as well. She wouldn't have had time to read it. She was too busy locating three tons of granite boulders.

The Manning installation took two days. She was standing on a ladder on the second, stringing up large-mouthed bass, when Brian appeared. "Don't tell me," he said, "#54 A Carp Christmas."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Wrong," she said, coming down off the ladder. "It's #152 Fisherman's Paradise. What are you doing here? How did you know where I was?"

"My aunt had something she wanted me to ask you," he said, "but your incoming box was full, so I thought I'd come over here. She was wondering if she could move the date of her installation."

"To when?" Linny asked, getting out her handheld, thinking, not to the fourteenth. Please not to the fourteenth.

"To the twenty-third" he said. "She has a big dinner party that night. I know it's awfully close to Christmas—"

"No, that's great. People always want their installations early, so they can have them up for the whole season."

"I can see why," he said, looking at the tree. It was hung with fishhooks, sinkers, and feathered lures, and topping it was a gold-plated casting reel.

"You ain't seen nothing yet," she said, and led the way into the family room, where a stream trickled between artificial mossy banks.

"A River Runs Through It," he said.

"Exactly. And it's stocked, so the Mannings' guests can fish."

He picked up a sign that said "Gone Fishing." "How about you put this on the front door and go out for chai with me? You could say it's research for a new theme. Number 928 Chai and Chit-Chat."

"I can't," she said regretfully. "The nets aren't here yet, and I've still got the master bedroom to do."

"What's going to be in there, a reservoir?" he said and insisted on looking at all the other rooms before he left.

"I thought you didn't approve of professional Christmases," she said.

"I don't," he said, pointing to the waders hanging in front of the fireplace and the styrofoam cooler filled with beer on the mantel, "but it's fascinating, in a horrible sort of way. Speaking of which, how's our friend Ms. Freeh? Is she still *Twelfth Night*ing it?"

Amazingly, she was, though she v-mailed Linny twice a day with questions: "Could we have the shipwreck for the lawn decoration instead of as a holo?" "Do you think widow's weeds are really a good idea? I look so fat in black." And "Illyrium's not in the Middle East, is it?"

Linny answered them as best she could, did three Hanukkah installations and the Immerguts' Christmas Down Under, and tried to track down a set of Masai drums FedXUPS had lost. They were in Honolulu. Linny got them rerouted and was trying to calculate how long it would take for them to get there when there was a buzz.

Linny reached for the delete button and then realized it was the doorbell. It can't be the Masai drums already, she thought, and opened the door.

It was Brian, carrying two cardboard cones. "I knew you'd be too busy to go out for red tea, so I brought it here," he said. He handed her a cone and walked past her. "So this is your apartment?" he said, walking into the kitchen, her bedroom, her barely-room-for-one-person-and-a-computer office. "Definitely 'The Machine Stops,' " he said, looking at her flatscreen, streamer, rom files. "No Christmas tree? No large-mouthed bass?"

"I can't afford a Christmas designer," she said. "What are you doing here? Please tell me your aunt's picked a theme."

"No, but—" he set his cone down and pulled a sheaf of papers from his jacket with a flourish and presented it to her, "—I have the contract, signed, sealed, and delivered."

"But if she hasn't picked a theme—" Linny said.

He took the contract back from her and flipped to the second page. "Here,"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

he said, showing her. "'Theme to be chosen by Christmas designer,'" he read aloud. "She thinks you should pick the theme since you're the expert."

"That's wonderful," Linny said. If she got to choose the theme, she could base it on what was available and pretty. There was that gorgeous beaten copper angel at ohheavens.com. It would go perfectly with Mrs. Shields' Arts and Crafts furniture—

"All she asks is that it be something related to Christmas, not Las Vegas. Or whaling."

Linny nodded happily. "Of course. Thank you for bringing it. You didn't have to drive all the way over here," she said. "You could have just e-mailed it."

"Aunt Darby doesn't trust computers, especially where contracts are concerned. She likes having an actual piece of paper in front of her. Your computer's buzzing."

She went into the office. It was Pandora. "*Twelfth Night* is *not* going to work," she said icily. "I just talked to Cecelia Towstrapp. Why didn't you tell me it was about transvestites? I *knew* cross-gartering was an R!"

"It's not about transvestites," Linny said. "I mean, Viola does dress up like a man, but it isn't because of a sexual—"

"Put it on speaker," Brian, who'd followed her in, said, and pulled up a stool to sit next to her. "Ms. Freeh, do you remember me? I met you on Thanksgiving?"

"Yes, you were the one who talked me into doing *Twelfth Night*," she said, but considerably less icily. "You should have told me it had cross-dressing in it. Lulu Pazanetta's already doing Rocky Horror Picture Show, so I can't—"

"Viola dresses up like a man because she's afraid for her safety as a woman alone in a strange country," Brian said. "She doesn't intentionally mean to fool the duke." He leaned in to look directly into the screen. "She wants to tell him, but she can't. Telling the duke the truth means admitting she's tricked him, that she's lied to him."

Linny wished there was a little more room in here. He was sitting even closer than he had in the car, and the smell of his skin, his breath, as he spoke earnestly to Pandora—

"She can't risk telling him. She's in love with him," he said. "But she also knows he's bound to find out sooner or later, and when he does, he's bound to feel betrayed and never want to speak to her again. So she's trapped."

There was a long, silent pause, and then Pandora said, "Oh, that's so romantic! You're right. It's a wonderful theme. Cecelia's a moron. You've convinced me. Transmit the contract."

You're kidding, Linny almost said, but she quickly typed in the contract details and sent it through. "*Thank* you," she whispered as soon as the contract replaced Pandora on the screen. "I cannot tell you how much work you've saved me."

"Good," he said, still much too close. "Then you've got time to go out to dinner with me."

"I can't," she said regretfully. "I have to do a long-distance installation in Aruba starting at five, and I still haven't found a decontamination suit."

'I won't even ask what *their* Christmas theme is," he said. "Look, I know this is your busy season, and probably you're already lining up clients for next year, but you can't tell me you can't take at least one day off a year. I know it won't be till after Christmas," he said when she started to protest, "I just want to put my bid in now."

Pandora's image reappeared on the screen. "The sixteenth won't work. You couldn't do it tomorrow, could you?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

If only she could. She'd be free of Pandora for the rest of the season. "I'm afraid not."

"Oh, dear, it's the only day I've got free. I'll have to see what I can juggle in my calendar and get back to you."

And probably tell me *Twelfth Night* won't work, Linny thought, waiting for her override, but she didn't send a single v-message. She didn't send the contract either, but at least she hadn't changed her mind. A week later they were still with *Twelfth Night.*

"It's a miracle," she told Norwall and Inge during their mid-December three-way conference. "I think she's actually ready to sign a contract. And that will only leave Mrs. Shields."

"I wanted to talk to you about that," Inge said. "When I tried to run the netcheck on her, I couldn't find anything."

"What do you mean?" Linny asked. "There was a block on the information?"

"I thought you said the financial check had already been done," Norwall said.

"It wasn't blocked," Inge said. "There wasn't a firewall, but when I put her name in, it gave me information on the house, but nothing else. When I ask for personal data, financial records, medical history, there's nothing, just a blank. And when I tried the address, I got the same thing. Her name as owner and nothing else."

"Sounds like some kind of sophisticated privacy baffle system," Norwall said, "but why—? What did you say her name was?"

"Shields," Inge said. "I didn't have a first name."

But a last name and an address should have been enough to get the rest of the information, Linny thought. "Are you sure you spelled Shields right?" she asked.

"Do you know her first name?" Norwall said.

"Yes," Linny said. "Darby."

"Darby?" he said, and then sharply, "What about the nephew, the engineer?"

"Brian West."

"Do you want me to try his name?" Inge asked.

"No, I'll take care of this," Norwall said and downlinked, even though they still had several things to discuss.

It was just as well. The Masai drums had gotten lost again, and it took her the better part of two days she didn't have to track them down in Nashville. She did the Kwanzaa installations and an Extreme Sports Christmas and then, emboldened by the fact that Pandora hadn't messaged her, sent her a *Twelfth Night* contract.

She got an override from her immediately. And she should never have said that about it being a miracle because the first words out of Pandora's mouth were, "It isn't going to work."

"Why not?" Linny asked. She refused to believe anyone else was doing *Twelfth Night.*

"It's the jester, Festus. Charlton Lebrock's ex is doing Christmas in Dodge City, and there's a Festus in that. He's a drunk."

"The jester's name is Feste," Linny protested, but to no avail. Pandora's mind, such as it was, was made up.

"We'll have to do a different play. One that no one else has done."

"*Coriolanus,*" Linny suggested, wishing Brian was here and wondering if she could send him an override. "*The Tempest.*"

"That people have *heard* of," Pandora said.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Othello, Linny thought, with an outdoor tableau of you being smothered with a pillow. "*As You Like It. Richard III.*"

But all the plays people had heard of had already been done by Pandora's friends, or Pandora's friends' exes, or their exes' exes. Brian's right, Linny thought, this whole theme thing *has* gotten out of hand. Why can't people have a Christmas they like? Why do they have to have something completely unique?

They finally settled on *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* which should at least be comparatively easy—flowers, fairies, a woodland holo. She started a search for a donkey's head. Costumes.com didn't have one. She tried Don We Now Our Gay Apparel.

The screen buzzed, and Norwall's image appeared. "She's Sara Darbingdon," he said.

"Who is?" Linny said blankly.

"Your client. Darby Shields. She's the head of Bridgetek International."

"Bridgetek International?" Linny said. "The software company?"

"The software *conglomerate*. Your client's the computer genius who started it."

"But that's impossible," Linny said. "Mrs. Shields doesn't know anything about computers. She doesn't even like sending e-mails."

"That's what she *told* you. Trust me, I ran a complete profile of her. Dr. Sara Darbingdon, 3404 Aspen Lane—"

Norwall's image disappeared and a news photo of Sara Darbingdon appeared. "Bridgetek CEO announces Intel merger." It was Mrs. Shields.

"But why would she pretend—"

"Because she didn't want you to know who you were talking to. She's obviously after deck.halls."

"After deck.halls? What do you mean?"

"I mean, they're researching a takeover. Or else starting their own Christmas company. With your ideas. How many themes did you show her?"

"Quite a few," Linny said, thinking of that first interview and the number of holos she'd clicked through, "but why—she's never even had a professional Christmas."

"Wrong again," he said, and a list came up on the screen. "Home and office Christmases for the last ten years, all done by Bridgetek's in-house designers."

"Christmas in the Country, O Holy Night, A Norman Rockwell Christmas, Christmas in Connecticut."

At least she was telling the truth about liking traditional Christmases, she thought irrelevantly. "But I still don't understand. If they already have Christmas designers—"

"Because we're successful, and conglomerates like Bridgetek are always looking for ways to co-opt successes. Look what Time-Warner-Microsoft did to graduation planning. They put every private planner out of business. You didn't give her a rom, did you?"

"She couldn't make up her mind which package—"

Norwall groaned. "Goodbye, deck.halls. Hello, Bridgetek Christmases, Inc."

She was shaking her head. "But she seemed so nice," she said, but she was thinking of how she'd kept asking to see different themes, how she'd asked her about her office, how she'd insisted Brian take her to Rock and a . . . Brian.

"You're wrong," she said. "She can't be Sara Darbingdon. There has to be some mistake. Her nephew helped me come up with a theme for Pandora Freeh. He wouldn't be a party to—"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"He's not her nephew."

After several seconds she managed to say, "What?"

"He works at Bridgetek. He's no relation to Dr. Darbingdon."

"I don't believe you," she said. "He hates the whole idea of professional Christmases."

"That's something he obviously said so you wouldn't catch on."

So she wouldn't catch on. She thought of Brian showing up at the Manning installation, at her apartment, of his walking into her office, looking at her equipment. And all the while pretending that he—

"They were obviously after your designs," Norwall said, "pumping you for the names of clients and suppliers."

"Who do you get a large-mouthed bass from anyway?" Brian had said, and he'd asked her all about her best Christmas and her most difficult.

"What's his name?" she said.

"Who? Oh, the so-called nephew? He actually used his own name, I suppose because it isn't one you'd recognize, but he's not an engineer. He's a marketing designer."

"I have to go," Linny said.

"The house is hers, too. I was surprised. When I saw your proposal layouts, I assumed it had to be a rental for the occasion, but no, she actually lives in it when she's not in San Francisco. Or Stockholm. She's got houses there, too, plus apartments in Manhattan, Sydney, São Paolo, Addis Ababa, and Beijing. And a villa in Iceland."

"I like to keep things simple," she'd said. "I've always wanted to go to Scandinavia."

"I've got an override from Pandora Freeh," she lied. "I've got to go."

"Pandora will have to wait," Norwall said. "We have to talk about what you're going to do about this."

"I'll call you back," she said and downlinked before he could protest.

And then sat there, thinking, I don't believe it. But she did. After all, it was the oldest trick in the book. Number 145 Romantic Con Men. Sweettalk the mark into revealing her secrets. Help her carry something heavy, sit too close to her in her office, and for good measure, pretend he liked E.M. Forster, which he had no doubt found out about from one of those netchecks. And she had fallen for it, hook, line and sinker. Number 182 Fisherman's Paradise.

The screen buzzed an override. She reached for the delete key, but it wasn't Norwall. It was Pandora.

"*A Midsummer Night's Dream* won't work, after all," she said. "Fashad Tweedlowe did Christmas at the Grand Canyon last year."

"The Grand Canyon?" Linny said, unable to see the connection.

"Riding down to the bottom of the *Grand Canyon*," Pandora said.

Oh, she can't mean—

"*Burros*," Pandora said. "They ride burros."

"Bottom's an ass."

"Ass, burro, it's the same thing. Maybe your young man was right. I should do *Twelfth Night*."

He's not my young man, Linny thought. He's a marketing designer for Bridgetek.

"But it's just so obscure. Didn't Shakespeare write any other plays?"

"Just the thirty-nine," Linny said. "And 154 sonnets."

"The sonnets," Pandora said thoughtfully. "That's an idea. Let me think about that." Her image blinked off. The screen immediately buzzed again.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It was Brian. She hit "record answer," and Brian said, "Look, I know you're wildly busy and my chances of taking you out for a red tea are nonexistent till after Christmas, but if you'll tell me where you're going to be stringing up hot dogs or synchronized swimmers, I'll bring you a cone. I'll even hold it for you so you can keep both hands free for plucking chickens or whatever it is you'll be doing."

Fighting off intellectual property thieves, she thought. Norwall was right. They had to talk about what she was going to do.

She uplinked to him.

"You don't do anything. If she gets demanding, you tell her you know what she's up to and you have no intention of helping her steal deck.halls out from under you."

But she has all those people coming for dinner, Linny thought, and then realized that was probably a lie, too.

"I know this is Bridgetek you're dealing with," Norwall was saying, "but there's no contract, and she's on very shaky legal ground herself: fraud, criminal misrepresentation—"

"I'm afraid there is a contract," Linny said ruefully. "She signed it yesterday."

"On-line?"

"No, an actual signature."

Norwall nodded. "So there wouldn't be a corneal ID."

Of course. "Aunt Darby doesn't trust on-line contracts," my foot. She hadn't wanted electronic identification of her signature.

"What name did she use?" Norwall said. "If she used Shields, the contract's invalid."

Linny went and got the contract, hoping that was the case, but it was an illegible scrawl. She scanned it in for Norwall.

"No, that's definitely Sara Darbingdon's signature," he said. "And it's the address of the house that's listed on the contract, not the owner. This changes things."

"How?"

"If you've got a legally-binding contract—she didn't snail mail this to you, did she?"

"No, her—Bri—the marketing designer brought it over."

"Too bad," he said. "We might have been able to prove mail fraud. But under the circumstances, unless you can prove fraudulent signing conditions—"

"I thought I was signing a contract with someone else," Linny said. "Doesn't that count as fraudulent?"

He shook his head. "It's your word against hers, or, rather, against Bridgetek's legal department, which is like going up against—"

"Are you telling me that even though she's trying to steal my ideas, I might have to do her *Christmas?*" she said, feeling sick at the thought of it. What if Brian showed up?

"Calm down," Norwall said. "Let me uplink to lawyer.com and see where we stand, and then we'll decide what to do. Don't worry. They're not going to get away with this."

They've already gotten away with it, Linny thought numbly. She called up her messages and tried to get some work done, but she couldn't concentrate. She ended up going through Shakespeare's sonnets, looking for one she could use for Pandora, but there wasn't much to work with. "Bare, ruined choirs"? "The barren rage of death's eternal cold"?

The screen buzzed. "It's what I was afraid of. The contract's legally bind-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing, and the payment-on-signing's already been deposited in your on-line account. You're legally obligated to do the Christmas."

"I can't—" Linny said.

"The object is to minimize the damage and not reveal any more trade secrets than you already have. What theme is it? How detailed was your proposal?"

"I haven't done it yet. Mrs. Shie—she left the theme to my discretion."

"And that's in the contract?" he said excitedly.

"Yes. No. I mean, that line was left blank, to be filled in by me."

"This changes everything. Let me—" he said, and his image disappeared.

She went back to dissecting sonnets: "Roses have thorns and silver fountains mud." "My grief lies onward and my joy behind."

She gave up and sat there waiting for Norwall to override. "I checked with lawyer.com," he said when he came on, "and it's perfectly legal. Thank God she didn't pick a theme. There isn't a thing Dr. Darbingdon or Bridgetek will be able to do about it."

"About what?" Linny asked.

"About the elegant revenge you're going to work on them."

"Revenge?"

"Yes," he said eagerly. "You get to pick the theme. All right. You pick Death and Destruction or Nightmares or Strip Mining. You do the installation—when is it, by the way?"

"A week from now. The twenty-third. But—"

"You decorate her house totally as per the contract, only with Disgusting Things in Caves or Revenge is Sweet, and when she sees it, you've not only ruined her Christmas, but she knows she can't go around stealing people's concepts. And you have your revenge."

"What does that have to do with Christmas?" Linny murmured.

"What?" Norwall said.

"Nothing. Isn't it enough to tell them we know what they're up to and refuse to do the installation?"

"She'll just get Bridgetek's designers to do it. This way, she's publicly humiliated. She's having a dinner party for Bridgetek's board of directors the night of the day you're scheduled to do the installation."

She wasn't lying about that either, Linny thought.

"I think Hell Hath No Fury would be perfect," Norwall said.

"But it's Christmas. It's not supposed to be a time for revenge. It's supposed to be the season of forgiveness and good will."

"After what they've done to you? All right, no revenge themes. But you have to do *something,* unless you just want to hand your clients over to them."

"I'll go talk to them," she said, but her heart quailed at the thought.

"All right, have it your way, no revenge," Norwall said, throwing up his hands. "But let me handle it. I don't trust you to be tough enough. Let me be the one to confront them."

"All right," Linny said gratefully.

"Good," Norwall said. "Don't worry, I'll take care of everything."

But she did worry. She tried to take her mind off it by focusing on the sonnet problem, but it wasn't much help.

"Poems, you mean?" Pandora said vaguely when Linny called her with her proposal. "Oh, I don't want *poems.* They're so—don't you have any other ideas?"

"Stock car racing?" Linny said at random. "Herbs and spices? Duck decoys? Media bias?"

"It has to have the bust in it."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Pike's Peak or Bust? she thought wildly. Or Great Busts of History, with Madonna and Diana Dors and the Great Crash of 2006. "How about Famous Dramatists?"

"Mitzi Poulakakos did that five years ago."

I wonder if I could talk her into "Fire" as a theme, Linny thought. That way I could just burn down her house. "Or Christmas at the Globe Theater?"

"I don't know . . . maybe . . . why don't you work up a proposal?"

Linny did, and installed the Goldfarbs' Christmas and the Marcianos' Hanukkah, trying to reach Norwall at intervals and finally succeeding on the twenty-first.

"All taken care of," he said. "You don't have to worry about anything."

"You talked to them?"

"I did, and told her in no uncertain terms to leave you alone or you'd sue."

"What did she say?" she said, wanting to ask if Brian had been there.

"They . . . oh, my God, the Pyramids just fell down," he said. "Don't give it another thought. All taken care of. If you get any messages from them, delete them."

Linny did, putting them on "automatic delete" so she didn't even have to hear Brian's voice and moving on to messages about the Carmodys' flamingos, a delivery of wrapping paper that had butterflies instead of caterpillars on it, and the ever-present problem of Pandora, who had decided Christmas at the Globe was too confusing.

"People might be expecting to see an actual globe," she said, and Linny thought, why did I get angry when I found out Brian and Dr. Darbingdon were trying to steal my business? Why didn't I jump at the chance?

"How about Christmas in Westminster Abbey?" she suggested. "Candles, a holo of the nave, busts of Byron and Shakespeare and Keats. All the famous poets are buried there."

Shakespeare wasn't, but Pandora and her friends wouldn't know that. "I can see it all now—Poet's Corner, Queen Elizabeth's tomb, the Crown Jewels—"

"The Crown Jewels," Pandora said, pleased. "I don't suppose you could work King Harry's coronation in somehow?"

"Why not?" Linny said. *I have nothing else to do between now and the twenty-fifth.* She uplinked to Fergie's Fripperies and reserved an ermine cape and then called Rock and a Hard Place and asked what they had left in literary busts.

"Not a thing. I've got some statues—rappers, mostly, and a Sammy Sosa. I don't have a Judas either."

A Judas?

"The closest thing I've got is an Adonis," he went on. "You could maybe put a tunic on him and thirty pieces of silver in his hand. Do you want me to send it over?"

"Send it over where?" Linny asked with a sinking feeling.

"To 3404 Aspen Lane," he said. "Mrs. Shields. Do you want the Adonis or not?"

"Not," Linny said, hit end, and called a taxi.

She worried the whole way out on the mag-lev and in the taxi from the station about what she might find, but when it pulled up in front of the house she saw a row of life-size tin soldiers standing stiffly in red and blue uniforms.

"Oh, good, Norwall thought better of getting revenge," she murmured, sliding her card through the taxi's reader. He'd decided to fulfill their contract with a standard treatment instead, and one Bridgetek couldn't learn

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

anything from. Babes in Toyland was one of the most common Christmas themes.

She hurried across the street and up the path to the door, and then stopped short. The soldiers had their toy rifles raised and pointed at a life-sized doll in a pink dress and a blindfold. "Oh, no," Linny murmured and hurried inside.

The tree in the hall was swathed in crime scene tape and flashing red-white-and-blue police lights, and there was a painting of Benedict Arnold on the wall behind it.

She went into the living room, where a holo of Julius Caesar being stabbed was playing on a continuous loop. She walked through Brutus and into the dining room.

The walls and table were draped in black and in the center of the table was a horse's head with a sign pinned to the mane. "This is what happens to people who try to steal our design concepts," it read. "Merry Christmas, deck halls."

Linny pulled the sign off, wadded it up, and walked warily into the study. Statues filled the room, cups of wassail in their hands as if this was a Christmas party. Nero, and Hitler, who was *Sieg Heil*ing with his other hand, and Simon Legree, and someone who was probably supposed to be Iago from the handkerchief in his hand.

Oh, *no*. I can't let Mrs. Shields see this, Linny thought and then remembered she wasn't Mrs. Shields.

"I still can't let her see it," she thought, sick at the thought of what Brian would say when he saw this, of what he'd think if he believed she'd done this. Even though he'd—

"Revenge doesn't have anything to do with Christmas," she said firmly and began pulling down the black garlands looped all around the room.

There was a tree here, too, hidden behind Billy the Kid. It was lying under a guillotine, its tip, with the star still on it, chopped off, and ornaments in the shape of instruments of torture. Linny finished pulling down the garlands, stuffed them into a trash bag, and began unhooking the ornaments.

There was a sound. Oh, God, what if it's Brian? she thought, leaping for the door, but it was only a workman, wearing the red-white-blue-and-brown coveralls of FedXUPS and carrying a toga'd and gold-laurel-wreathed mannequin.

"What's this?" she asked.

The workman righted the mannequin and set it down. "Nero," he said, though she had already figured that out from the plaster violin under the statue's chin. "Where do you want it?"

"Back where you got it," she said. "Put it back in the truck."

"I've got a delivery order for this address," he said, pulling out his handheld.

"I'm rescinding the order." She reached for the handheld and clicked "cancel." "I want all of these returned," she said, indicating Hitler, et al.

"Those aren't ours," he said. "We don't do statues. Or fictionals. The fictionals are from Eveningprimrose. The only ones that are ours are the toy soldiers and the doll." He checked his manifest. "And the Pontius Pilate in the bathroom."

Oh, Norwall. "Well, take it back, too."

"I'll have to charge you extra for an unscheduled pickup."

"Fine," Linny said, and then, as he picked up Nero, "What would you charge to take the rest of these back to—" she tipped Stalin forward to take a look at the bottom of his foot, "Rock and a Hard Place and Eveningprimrose?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Two days before Christmas? Are you kidding?" He picked up Nero and started out. "You're lucky I've got room on the truck for the toy soldiers. Otherwise, you'd have had to wait till January. There's no way you're going to get anybody to do unscheduled pickups this close to Christmas."

He was right, but she tried anyway, calling Rock and a Hard Place and Eveningprimrose, and then Nowheretoturn Trucking, which had helped her one time on the twenty-fourth with an emergency delivery to Pandora's, but she got v-mail on all three, and her overrides didn't work. She would have to talk the FedXUPS guy into taking at least some of the statues, but he and his truck were already gone.

At least he took the firing squad, she thought, looking at the trampled snow, and went back inside. She would have to do it herself. Dr. Darbingdon couldn't walk in here and see the house like this. She went out to the dining room and scooped up the tablecloth by the corners, the horse's head and dishes and all, into a clanking bundle, tied the ends, and carried it out back to the trash recycle, and then went back into the study and began wrestling Nixon through the dining room toward the back door.

She made it as far as the door of the kitchen, which apparently wasn't as wide as the study's, because his arms, raised in his trademark V's for victory, got wedged in the door and wouldn't budge. She tried to turn him sideways, but his arms were jammed tight.

They'll have to come off, she thought, and began unbuttoning his jacket so she could unscrew the arms. The front door opened. Oh, good, she thought, he came back for the Pilate in the bathroom. "Can you give me a hand? I'm in the dining room," she called, struggling with the sleeve.

"What the hell's the idea?" Brian said.

She looked up. He was standing in the door to the living room, his fists full of police car lights and crime scene tape. The lights were still flashing blindingly.

"You found out," he said.

"I found out," she said

"And you did this," he said, looking at Brutus.

"No, though it would have been an appropriate reaction. What did you expect me to do, be overjoyed?"

"No," he said. "I thought maybe . . . no, I suppose not."

It wasn't at all the reaction she'd expected. She'd expected slick explanations, but he just stood there, his hands full of flashing red and blue, staring at the holo and looking like he'd been kicked in the stomach. After a long minute, he said bitterly, "I suppose you ran a background check and found out who she really was."

Linny nodded. "They're routine for all new clients, even with a little-nobody Christmas company like deck.halls."

"I told her you were bound to found out," he said. "I told her lying to you was fatally stupid, that we should just tell you—"

"And that would somehow make it more acceptable to me?"

He waited a minute before answering. "I thought it might be a possibility."

A possibility. The arrogance of the man. "Well, it's not," she snapped.

"Apparently not," he said, looking at John Wilkes Booth pouring himself a cup of wassail. "And so you—"

"I told you, I didn't do this. In fact, I was trying to get it taken down before anybody saw it. I don't believe in an eye for an eye, especially at Christmas." She reached forward and took the lights and tape from him and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

stuffed them in a garbage bag. "Dr. Darbingdon's going to be here in a few minutes," she said, "and some of this is too heavy for me to move, so if you don't want her to see this, you're going to have to help me. And, no, you don't have to remind me that I'm under contract. I am painfully aware of that."

"I definitely don't want her to see this," he said and seemed to come to himself. He hoisted Nixon up. "Where do you want me to put this?"

"Out back behind the spruces for now," she said, and went ahead into the kitchen to open the back door for him. A grim-looking automated store mannequin in a black dress stood at the stove, stirring a pot.

"Who's that supposed to be?" Brian asked, grunting as he maneuvered Nixon through the door. "Lucrezia Borgia?"

"Linda Tripp," she said, and as soon as Brian and Nixon went out, switched it off, unplugged the control box, and began winding up the cord. "I can get this one," she said when he came back in. "You get the ones in the study."

She dismantled Linda and then the guillotine and put them out back while he carried out Haldeman and Ehrlichman, and then linked to hollyandivy.com to order a Number One. It wasn't much, but there wasn't time for anything but standard decorations, if that.

Hollyandivy was sold out. She linked to Everything Christmas. "Site closed," it said. She punched in their emergency number. "We've been completely cleaned out since the nineteenth," Nadia told her. "Did you try Holiday Heaven?"

She tried Holiday Heaven, and Christmas'r'Us and Partyplus. "Everyone's completely sold out," she told Brian when he reappeared with O.J. Simpson. "The only supplier who has anything in stock is thegooseisgettingfat.com, and all they've got is a Mayan snake god and two dozen yellow polka-dot bikinis, no candles, no lights. Dr. Darbingdon wouldn't have her old decorations in the basement, would she?"

He shook his head. "She gave them all to charity after she started having Bridgetek do her Christmases. Nobody's got anything?"

"No," she said, scrolling through a list of electronics suppliers. Maybe one of them would have some colored LEDs that could pass for Christmas tree lights—

Her screen buzzed. "The Westminster Abbey theme won't work," Pandora Freeh said.

"Who is it?" Brian hissed.

"I just found out Sashine Nackerty's new live-in's old live-in's theme last year was A Double-Decker Tour of London—the Tower, Madame Tussaud's, mad cow disease, Big Ben—"

"*Who* is it?"

"I can't talk right now," Linny said desperately. "I've got an emergency."

"An emergency!" Pandora said, waving it aside. "The Abbey's in London! If Jane sees it, she'll think I'm trying to remind her live-in of his old live-in, and—"

"Who *is* it?" Brian said. "Is it my aunt?"

"No," Linny hissed and hit "speaker" so he could hear for himself.

"Besides which, Westminster Abbey's only one tiny stop on this elaborate tour!" Pandora said. "The theme just won't work. You'll have to come up with something else."

"Westminster Abbey?" Brian whispered. "What happened to *Twelfth Night?*"

"Too intellectual," she whispered back. "And she insisted it had to be

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

something that involved Shakespeare's bust. Poet's Corner was the only thing I could think of."

"—and it needs to be done by tomorrow because that's when Griselda and Carlos are coming. I invited them to lunch, having no idea—"

"Shakespeare wasn't buried in Westminster Abbey," Brian whispered.

"I am aware of that, but I had to come up with something, and since when are you such a stickler for the truth?"

"Touché," he said.

"I sympathize with your situation," Linny said into the phone, "but I have a client arriving any minute to no Christmas at all, so if I could call you back—"

"What happened?" Pandora said, instantly interested. "Didn't FedXUPS arrive? That happened to me one time before I hired you—it was *why* I hired you, as a matter of fact. The truck was one of those unmanned robot things, which they assured me was perfectly reliable—"

"No, it wasn't the truck. It—" she glanced at Brian. "It's too complicated to explain right now. I have to try and find some Christmas decorations—"

"What do you need?" Pandora said. "Maybe I can help."

"No, you don't understand, none of the suppliers—"

"Have you got decorations?" Brian cut in.

"Yes, a whole attic full. Grisham says I never throw anything away, but I always say, you never know when things might come in handy. They're the ones I used before I started hiring it done. It's mostly non-themed stuff. Santas and snowmen and jingle bells."

"I'll be right over," Brian said, grabbing his coat.

"Oh, and I've got several antelope from this darling Home on the Range Christmas I did. If you have some antlers, they'd look just like reindeer."

"You're a godsend," Brian said, starting for the door.

"Well, after all, that's what Christmas is all about, isn't it, helping each other? Oh, dear, I just thought of something. I don't have a tree. I do have a crane, from Christmas on a Construction Site. You could—"

"We're set for trees. Brian will be right over," Linny said and hung up. "Don't let her give you a crane," she called after him, "or a bulldozer. And no roaming buffalo."

She wrestled O.J. out the back door and then took down the rack and Iron Maiden ornaments, trying to gauge how long it would take Brian to get there and back if he floored the Incite.

The answer was: over half an hour. "I had a terrible time getting away from her," he said, coming in carrying a dusty plastic wise man, a bouquet of even dustier poinsettias, and a styrofoam snowman. "She wanted to tell me all about what she wants for her new Christmas theme."

"Pandora can have whatever her little heart desires," Linny said, putting the wise man where the guillotine had stood. She took the poinsettias from him.

"Everything's pretty grubby," Brian said, wiping the snowman against his sleeve. "It'll need to be washed off."

"We don't have time," Linny said, hurrying into the kitchen for a vase for the poinsettias. "They'll be here—oh, gosh, in five minutes. We'll call it An Attic Christmas. Go get the rest of the decorations."

He returned with a second wise man, two ceramic elves, and an armful of cobwebby bubble lights. "The good news is the Christmas spirit is alive and well in spite of professional Christmases," he said, handing her the lights. "The bad news is, Pandora's decided her new theme should be Godsends of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

History. People who've given aid and assistance through the centuries: The Good Samaritan, Florence Nightingale, the inventor of laserliposuction."

"What about the all-essential bust of Shakespeare?" Linny asked, draping the lights haphazardly around the tree.

"He's in the car," Brian said. "Pandora could only find two of the wise men. She sent Shakespeare as a third. And a bathrobe to drape him in. Where do you want the elves?"

"Coffee table," she said, plugging in the lights. Two of them were burnt out. "Did she send any replacement bulbs?"

"I'll check," he said, rummaging in an enormous box he'd brought in of ornaments, burned-down candles, plastic mistletoe, and bedraggled tinsel.

Linny set him to decorating the tree while she finished placing the five swans-a-swimming with several feathers missing, and a Victorian angel with a bent wing, looking anxiously at her watch. Dr. Darbingdon was already late.

"Where do you want this?" Brian asked and held up a gold-painted chicken-wire sleigh and eight tiny reindeer.

"Good Lord," she said.

"I know. I apologize for ever criticizing Christmas designers. It's obvious you're saving people from themselves. Bathroom?"

Linny nodded. "Bathroom." She began arranging the snow village houses on the sideboard.

"Linny!" Brian called.

"What?" she said, hurrying into the bathroom. A six-foot, solid-looking toga'd statue stood over the sink, its marble hands extended. "Oh, I forgot all about Pilate."

"Pilate? What's he doing in the bathroom?"

"Washing his hands."

"Of course," he said. "Don't tell me he's marble."

"No, plaster, I think," she said.

He took hold of Pilate's waist and tried to lift him. "Definitely marble. Any chance of getting the robo-dolly back here?"

She shook her head. "He had six more deliveries."

"When's my aunt due here?"

She looked at her watch. "Fifteen minutes ago."

"Then we'll just have to manhandle him out of here. Wait," he said as she moved to take hold of one of Pilate's hands, "let me get around behind him first. Then you pull and I'll . . . what's this?"

"What's what?" Linny asked, leaning around Pilate to see. Brian had untaped a sign from the statue's back and was reading it.

"What is it?" she asked, though it was obvious it was another of Norwall's signs, and when he didn't answer, "What does it say?"

"It says, 'This is what you get for trying to steal my concepts and my clients,'" Brian read. He looked up. "You thought that's what we were trying to do—take over your clientele?"

"Isn't that what you *were* trying to do?"

"Of *course* not. How could you even *think* that? No wonder you put up all this," he said, gesturing to include Pilate and the rest of the house.

"I told you, I didn't put it up. But if you weren't spying on me," she said, bewildered, "what *were* you doing?"

"It's a long story," he said. "Aunt Darby—"

"She's not your aunt," Linny said coldly.

"Not my. . . ?" he said, and now he was the one who looked bewildered.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"No, she's not genetically related to me but . . . she's my parents' best friend. I lived with her while they were at Tombaugh Station when I was a kid and again in high school when they were out in the Asteroid Belt."

And Norwall knew that, Linny thought. Inge had said he'd run complete personal histories. He knew it and didn't tell me.

"I wasn't lying when I called her Aunt Darby," he said. "I've always called her that."

"And I suppose her name really is Mrs. Shields and you really are an engineer and you build dams? What about her telling me she didn't understand computers? And that she'd never had a professionally done Christmas before, that she's always put up her decorations with her own two little hands?"

"She was afraid if you knew who she was, you'd wonder why she wasn't using Bridgetek's decorators and would assume she had plenty of other options, so you'd refuse to take her on, especially at such a late date. Plus, she knew you did your interviews online and she needed to get you out to the house, so she came up with that whole ridiculous technophobic Mrs. Shields thing, and by the time I realized what she was up to, it was too late to stop her. She'd already told you so many lies about who and what we were—"

"Stop her from what?"

"You did a Christmas display for Howard Greenfeld in October."

"Hanukkah," she said. "Hanukkah in Lapland. He needed the installation early because he was leaving for New Palestine."

"Hanukkah in Lapland?" Brian said. "Do they even *have* Hanukkah in Lapland? What did you do?"

"Reindeer and menorahs. And a holo of the aurora borealis. What about Howard Greenfeld?"

"He's a friend of Aunt Darby's. She was talking to him online when she apparently spotted you among the caribou and decided you were just what I needed."

"Needed?"

"Aunt Darby's one of the world's great fixers. Bridgetek doesn't take over businesses—it fixes them. Unfortunately, Aunt Darby doesn't confine herself to fixing companies' problems. She also fixes people's problems. Or what she perceives to be their problems. When I was ten, she decided I needed work on coordination skills and insisted I take tuba lessons. And learn to bowl. Two years ago she decided my work wasn't challenging enough and got me a job at Bridgetek. This year she decided my problem was that I was spending too much time at said job and not seeing anybody."

She was trying to fix us up, Linny thought. That was why he was so rude that first day. That was why she kept talking about "The Machine Stops" and how hard it is for young people to meet. "Your aunt was matchmaking?" she said.

He nodded grimly. "She was matchmaking. Her first plan was to invite you to a party at Bridgetek, but after she ran a netcheck on you and found out how busy you are this time of year, she came up with the bright idea of hiring you to do her house."

"And of sending you to my apartment and the Manning installation."

"No," Brian said. "After that first day, she didn't have to send me. It was all my own idea. The contract was just an excuse." He smiled crookedly at her. "I loved playing the tuba."

"What?" she said, bewildered again.

"I even ended up loving bowling. Aunt Darby's always right. My old job

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

wasn't challenging enough. I love working for Bridgetek. She always knows exactly what I need, even if I don't. Only her way of going about it—"

He reached up and smacked the back of Pilate's head with his open palm. "I *told* her you'd find out and feel betrayed and—I told her it would end up like this," he said, gesturing to include the whole house, "with you—"

"I told you, I didn't do this."

He stopped in mid-gesture, his hand still out. "You thought I was spying on you," he said slowly, "that we were trying to steal your business, but even though you thought that, you were still trying to take the decorations down before we arrived. Why?"

"I told you, I didn't want her to see them," she said. "I knew she had the board of directors coming for dinner and . . ."

"Even though you thought she had lied to you," he said, coming around from behind Pilate toward her. "Even though you thought I'd romanced you to get information out of you. . . ."

"I . . . revenge didn't seem to have anything to do with Christmas. I . . . it," she stammered, trying not to be so aware of his scent, "it's supposed to be about forgiveness and . . . and . . . good will . . . and . . ."

"Love?"

She backed into the sink. "Charity," she said, and the doorbell rang.

"Oh, my God, it's Aunt Darby," Brian said.

It was the caterers. Brian recruited them and their robo-dolly to help lug Pilate out back behind the spruces, and Linny ran through the house, making sure they hadn't missed anything else.

They hadn't, except for the chicken-wire sleigh and reindeer, which had gotten bent when Brian was removing Pilate. She unbent it, more or less. "The decorations look awful," she told Brian, setting it on the sink. "This won't fool anybody."

"I think there's been enough fooling of people," he said. "Aunt Darby will love it. This is just what she wanted. As you said, Christmas is the season of charity."

"I hope so."

"And forgiveness?" he said, backing her into the sink again.

"Oh, I just *love* it," a woman's voice, not Aunt Darby's, said. "How perfectly *pre-retro*!"

"Even some of the lights are burnt out," a man's delighted voice said.

"And look at the dust! You were right, Darby, this young woman is a genius!"

"I wonder where she and Brian are," Aunt Darby said.

"Oh, my God, will you look at that!" a third voice exclaimed. "Our neighbors had light-up wise men just like that on their front lawn when I was a kid!"

Linny clapped her hand to her mouth. "Oh, no! I forgot all about the lawn decorations!"

"I have just the thing," Brian said, grabbing her by the hand and leading her through the living room, past the dinner guests and Aunt Darby, out the front door, onto the lawn.

"Room," he said, gesturing toward the window where Aunt Darby and the Bridgetek board of directors stood watching. "View."

"But this is supposed to be an Attic Christmas, not E.M. Forster," she protested.

"Aunt Darby will love it," he said, walking back to the sidewalk. "Ready?"

"No," she said, but she didn't move. "There's no wheat. Or poppies."

"Next Christmas," he said, and strode purposefully toward her. ❍

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The illustrious story of a Power Being, whose history reflects that of our own nation, is amusingly chronicled in Uncle River's tale of . . .

MY STOLEN SABRE

Uncle River

My sabre . . . well, I thought of it as that for over thirty years . . . was asleep at the time that it was stolen.

My sabre acquired its particular personality as a Power Being, early in its corporeal existence, during the most-violent (so far) trauma of the United States of America as a Nation. At the time, the sabre was the prize possession of Cavalry Lieutenant Jereboam Starr, a dirt farmer, who happened to own the Devil's own stallion, and who had relatives in both the Cherokee National Jail in Tahlequah, Indian Nation Territory, and the English House of Lords. The latter, and the fact that Lieutenant Starr was literate (in both English and Cherokee) was why he received an officer's commission. Well, the horse didn't hurt. It *was* wartime.

Jereboam Starr's fancy British relatives did not know he existed. He could have proved the lineage, but had neither reason nor means to make any point of it to people he didn't know and didn't expect to. Locally, well—the regiment's colonel, who recruited Jereboam, was a relative too . . . and knew about the horse.

The sabre came to initial awareness in the realization that the Nation which had killed Jereboam's maternal grandmother on the Trail of Tears and pretty well broke Grandpa's heart, was *having* a big-time trauma. This wasn't just a *fight*. This was a crack in the Nation's soul! Flat-out weird, from Jereboam's view, when you considered *what* Nation. Now, the sabre, becoming self-aware, did not think of itself as Cherokee, nor Southern, nor American, nor human at all. But being in circumstances to acquire an identity . . . well, you know who you know to know yourself by.

Jereboam and the sabre and the horse cracked skulls, smashed shoulders,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and generally kicked ass off and on for four years. They got knocked down a time or three too. Jereboam, the sabre . . . and the stallion . . . survived the war. Eventually, the side they were fighting for lost. Jereboam went back to the farm. The stallion went back to causing runaway wagons and related mayhem all over Tahlequah *every* time Jereboam rode that Devil-spawn to town for *twenty-three* years.

The horse also hated skunks and snakes. That stallion was *fast.* The snakes ended up red-wolf-bait. But the horse was also stupid. He never caught on to the skunks' range. They usually got away before he stopped sneezing. They nearly always got him first even when he *did* get them too. You'd think a horse that had been around that much gunfire would catch onto the concept of range. But, oh no!

Jereboam never would name the horse . . . unless "Damn You!" counts, as in, "Whoa, Damn You!" Probably not. The horse certainly didn't pay any heed. Jereboam never named the sabre either. The sabre woke up anyhow, *in* the aroma of blood, sweat, and powder, but *to* the poignant flavor of cracked souls.

Jereboam never married, and never lived with any of his children, though he acknowledged all he knew about, including a couple of maybes. He outlived the God-damned horse and settled to a tranquil old age with a tranquil mule that worked hard and willing a good six or seven hours a week, and with a still. He lived long enough to buy an automobile. But he didn't like it. It was kind of fun to drive, and he was smarter than that sneaky arm-breaking crank every sumbitchin' time even if he was a slow old geezer by then. But the fumes ruined the flavor of the whiskey. His customers agreed. "Hell with it," Jereboam said. "When I get too old to tend the mule, the customers can come to me. If they're too old, they can send a grandkid."

It was a warm spring afternoon in 1927 when Jereboam fell asleep on the porch in his ratty easy chair while watching the chickens eat ticks and the hawks eat chickens, and didn't wake up. Jereboam's grandson, Benson Catron, found the sabre, hung it in his tool shed, and gave it to his boy, Ben, Jr., for a tenth birthday present, three years later.

Ben, Jr., didn't remember his Great-Grandpa Starr very well, but he did pull out the sabre and wave it around every now and again, sometimes even from horseback. He also brought it with him when he married Emalee Salt and they moved into a room they weathered in on the side of Emalee's grandma's barn, the last of November, 1941.

It never even occurred to Ben, Jr., not to enlist so soon after marrying on hearing of the Declaration of War, following Pearl Harbor. He was somewhat embarrassed to learn, though, that his and Emalee's two months in the snug, hay-aromatic room on the side of Emalee's grandma's barn had not sufficed to seed a son to come home to. He promised Emalee (in English, letters in Cherokee never getting past wartime censors, who didn't know what the language was) to remedy this failing as soon as he got home . . . from wherever he was, which the letters didn't say, another wartime precaution. The letters stopped coming in late '43. Out of respect (and a lack of suitable prospects), Emalee waited till after the war ended to remarry. By then, no one quite remembered what the sabre was all about. But it obviously deserved some sort of respect. Emalee gave it to the Aximanda Fire-Baptized Holiness Church rummage sale.

Rev. Pice spotted the sabre while encouraging the ladies setting up goods (including many freshly home-baked) for the rummage sale. Among the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

church ladies that day was Myrna Gouldin, who told the preacher that her boy, Jimmy, was heading up to Chicago for a factory job. A preacher looks out for his flock. Rev. Pice figured that sabre would help Jimmy keep his Spirit up among so many Damnyankees. (Rev. Pice grew up in Georgia. When he accepted the Call at the Aximanda Fire-Baptized Holiness Church, one of his new congregation, Leonard Dalton, asked him, "How old were you when you learned 'Damn Yankee' is two words?" Rev. Pice replied, "*Is* it?" He knew he'd feel right at home.)

Rev. Pice bought the sabre himself for three dollars and a quarter, and presented it to Jimmy Gouldin with a fervent prayer for protection among the Heathen . . . a somewhat mixed metaphor, Jimmy having Cherokee, Dutch, Creek, and English in his ancestry, in about equal measure. But so it goes.

The sabre never made it to Chicago. Jimmy's car broke down in Springfield (Illinois, not Missouri). Jimmy sold the sabre to a tourist in front of Abe Lincoln's house—along with an assortment of suitable instructional narrative incantations. Jimmy didn't really give a damn which side the tourist was on, but did regard proper handling of a Power Being as a duty.

Jimmy went on to Chicago, where he made enough money to bring his family up a year later, and they all lived well-fed and miserable ever after.

The tourist didn't get it. He didn't know that the incantations were *for* anything. He thought Jimmy was just embellishing his sales price with folk tales. Charming, but insignificant. He kind of admired the artistry of Jimmy's pitch though. Parted with a whole seven and a half bucks for the sabre.

The tourist may not have noticed the sabre as a Power Being, but the sabre noticed. . . . Cracked souls. No soul! The sabre found the tourist (who from the sabre's point of view had no name) weird.

The tourist eventually hung the sabre on the wall of a room with a miscellany of other souvenirs, in his house in suburban Philadelphia, where he lived with a wife, 3.7 baby booming rug rats, and a psychotic live-in Negro (to use the term of the times) maid who muttered to herself in fluent Greek and Latin. (Well, if you were fluent in Greek and Latin and could only find a job as a maid, mightn't *you* go nuts too?) The tourist was rich enough to have a house with more rooms than he needed . . . with central heat on in all of them. People used the souvenir room erratically, and more to store stuff in than to do anything in.

The sabre contemplated how its current condition differed from Ben Catron, Sr.'s tool shed. It concluded that old Jereboam had done a more thorough job braining Yankees than he realized.

Later, the sabre changed this opinion.

The tourist acquired miscellaneous stuff for several more years, until sheer quantity of acquisition turned treasures to clutter. Among those items disposed of was the sabre. At least *someone* would pay five bucks for the damn thing at the Saint Robert the Munificent parish rummage sale, which, unlike the Aximanda Fire-Baptized Holiness rummage sale, was not conducted to raise money for the church, but for the local suburban Philadelphia chapter of the Busy Bee Do-Good Philanthropic Society.

The sabre felt like it had come home: Turned out you didn't have to be Cherokee or Southern to have a cracked soul. What possessed Jim and Jeannie Parkins to settle in Cambridge, Massachusetts, was a quirk of the Commonwealth's liquor laws. They were, anyhow, both Yankees. Jim was twenty-nine at the time. Jeannie was fifteen. They carried a copy of their

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

wedding certificate with them, as well as a copy of the Massachusetts statute that permitted an underage wife to be served alcoholic beverages in public establishments in company of her husband. Jim bought the sabre because he *had* five bucks, and figured he could get ten for it.

He was right. That's how much I paid him, in his crafts and whatever shop in the basement of the Pacifist Store, in Harvard Square in 1965. It was my friend, Mark, who I'd met at Herbert Marcuse's home when we were in high school (when Kennedy was president, and before Marcuse moved to California or the New Left was invented for him to be elder philosopher to), who spotted the sabre and recognized it as Civil War vintage. ("War Between the States" was terminology not then current in Harvard Square. When, during the presidential campaign of 1976, I asked people if they noticed that Jimmy Carter used that phrase rather than "Civil War" every Southerner I asked had noticed; not a single Northerner had.) Neither Mark nor I thought, in 1965, that there was any incongruity in finding such an implement as a Civil War cavalry sabre in the Pacifist Store.

Though it assisted me in occasional protective ceremonies over the years (and no, I will *not* tell you what incantations I used), I only actually employed the sabre as a physical weapon once. I was a senior in the most-experimental accredited college in the United States, in the scenic hills of 1969-psychedelic Vermont, settling into November and the customary months of frozen Hell to come. I had a nine A.M. class three days a week and taught a class (on C.G. Jung's work on alchemy) at ten on a fourth day.

This was 1969, an era when American economic genius had produced college dormitories with really thin, flimsy walls just at the time when really loud stereo systems became mass-affordable . . . not to mention the *rest* of what went on in 1969. Academic policy at this college effectively allowed students to do any damn thing they pleased, or nothing at all, for about two years; but you didn't get to *be* a senior unless you credibly studied *something.* The college actually had about an equal reputation for capable, creative graduates and for loony-tune students, but dormitory demographics did not make life easy for a studious senior who kept early hours. Not only that, but the campus coffee shop *jukebox* was directly below me. The coffee shop was open whatever hours someone was willing to tend it.

One night, at three A.M., I had *had it*! They *wouldn't* shut the jukebox off. They wouldn't even keep it down. After my third or fourth increasingly raving descent to ask for some *QUIET,* I charged down and pulled the plug. The coffee shop patrons plugged the jukebox back in. Several grinned. I suppose I *was* a pretty good show.

I didn't see it that way. After another few minutes in bed, an attempt more due to confusion what else to do than any hope of sleep, I got up yet once more, long hair a-fly. Wild-eyed, not to mention a bit blurry-eyed without my customary glasses, wearing just a knee-length blue-checked robe belted on (I slept naked), I grabbed the sabre, and stormed down the flight of stairs to the basement where the coffee shop was, yet once more.

. . . And realized that if I drew the sabre, nearly four feet long including its hilt, in that relatively small space with twenty or so 1969-experimental college-three-A.M. spaced people all around, someone was liable to get hurt.

So I hefted the sabre, sheath and all, and smashed the jukebox's thick glass top with the hilt. This did not stop the music. But after that, someone did shut it off.

A day or so later, I ran into the man who was in charge of supplies and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

equipment for the campus kitchen and coffee shop. He asked me why I'd smashed the jukebox. I told him.

Twenty-seven years later, I finally got up my nerve to ask my father if the college had sent him a bill for the jukebox. When I brought up the incident, he knew instantly what I was talking about. The college had not sent him a bill.

Less than another year later, on returning home from my father's eightieth birthday bash to my hermitage in a remote canyon on the old Outlaw Trail on the Arizona-New Mexico line, I found the sabre gone.

The sabre woke up. It did this every so often. It recognized a discontinuity. Not only was I not around (as sometimes happened for months at a time in the thirty-two years I had had the sabre), but someone else *was*. Was this like when old Jereboam croaked with his chickens? Or when Ben C., Jr., went off to the war and didn't come back? Or when Jimmy G.'s car broke down in that sleepy little Yankee political hotbed?

Well, no. I wasn't dead, and I didn't sell the sabre or give it to any church's rummage sale. Though it could have understood the concept: to steal, theft as means of transfer was only incidentally significant to its current position. *I* might wonder if it had somehow failed to protect me that it *could be* stolen. But *it* didn't see things that way. My opinion on the subject irregardless, it was not *my* Power Being. It was a Power Being that lived with me for a period, whose essential quality intermingled with a certain part of my life.

Now. . . . Cracked souls (not to mention skulls). No soul. The sabre had experienced these in the span of its corporeal existence, as well as a measure of tranquillity, or at least placidity. (It wasn't around the Aximanda Fire-Baptized Holiness Church long enough to encounter some doings that might have added to its repertoire, but that's another story.)

Cracked soul. No soul. Cherokee. Southerner. Yankee. What now? . . . Perhaps, lost soul? What *would* you call the proprietor of the Antiques and Collectibles Mall Emporium of suburban Phoenix?

The sabre looked around. Junk. Kitsch. Household miscellany that would have been familiar to old Jereboam. . . . And several other Power Beings: A two-hundred-year-old squash-blossom silver and turquoise necklace. A similarly venerable samovar (also silver) that a rabbi's widow had carried from Odessa (Russia, not Texas) about the time Jereboam finally burned the three-days-gone and already maggoty carcass of that damned horse of his. A pair of gold-rimmed goblets whose original owner was a seventeenth-century French alchemist, who employed the goblets to share wine with his partner in the philosophical quest, before they retired to their laboratory-bedchamber. From the sabre's point of view, the presence of others of its own kind was far more noteworthy than my absence, or what other human might have replaced me.

It was the goblets that helped the sabre readjust.

The goblets had been seized by the Crown at the time of the alchemist's conviction (in absentia) for heresy and sodomy, and his abrupt departure for the colonies, where he eventually learned distillation techniques for seven different perfectly hideous deadly poisons at that time unknown in France, but died himself of gangrene due to tissue necrosis following an apparently minor scorpion sting, before achieving vengeance.

Being delicate, a significant portion of the goblets' identity as Power Beings derived from their having survived the vicissitudes of corporeal exis-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tence so long at all, including being stolen twice, and surviving through the chaotic time of the French Revolution.

When you get several Power Beings newly together in one place, they are liable to get talking to each other. After all, most of us will introduce ourselves to new acquaintances. All the more, being as old Jereboam Starr's sabre, the alchemist's goblets, the rabbi's widow's samovar, and the squash blossom necklace didn't none of them feel comfortable with the situation a'-*tall*. Here they were ready and primed to dispense thunderbolts and philosophical elixirs, and no one around them knew how to tell a Power Being from a mouse turd. Well, they'd all been around the soul-dead before. But this present situation was even more irritating because there was *another* Power Being on the premises, utterly unrecognized as such though called on continually . . . which Power Being itself had about as much coherent consciousness as, say, your average two-year-old Devil-stallion.

"Cheezus Q. Rastaman!" exclaimed Antiques and Collectibles Mall Emporium proprietor Corman Wiegland, grey sideburns slick, his silk Western-style shirt sweat-stained at the armpits and stretched tight over his beer gut, "this [inarticulate growl] computer! Sumbitch done crashed the whole frumbuggerin inventory *again*!"

"Hey, you twit!," snarled the sabre.

"Wazzat?!" Corman jumped around in his osteopathically designed computer chair. How did a customer get in the store without the door bleeper bleeping? But no customer was there! Corman turned back around, shivering with what he thought was mere rage, though several present could have told him, had he been mentally disposed to take note, that it was the resonance of proximity to wakeful Power Beings. "You got me *hearing* things, Damn You!" he shouted, shaking his fist at the computer.

Jereboam's stallion, equally unimpressed by such imprecations, at least had behaved in such a manner as to keep Jereboam in shape. The computer merely beeped and flashed the repeated message: ERROR. FILE OR DIRECTORY NOT FOUND.

"Wake *up,* you twit!" the sabre hissed.

"Who, *me?*" the computer answered.

Antiques and Collectibles Mall Emporium proprietor Corman Wiegland leaped back, spun around. He was *losing* it! Well, he knew how to fix *that.* Mr. Daniels and Mr. Busch had just the cure. Corman rummaged purposefully. As it happened, the medicine he found first was a bottle of mescal. He downed what was in it on the spot, about a pint, worm and all. Saw God and the Devil in six shades of day-glo technicolor.

While our intrepid Mall Emporium proprietor was occupied with what he might have thought of as maintenance of his mental stability, if he had thought to think at all, the goblets gave the sabre a bit of elder-comradely advice: "Go easy. We didn't survive the French Revolution (not to mention the heresy trial) pushing lost souls over the edge."

"But that nitwit needs to wake up!" The sabre nodded (or *would* have, if it had been equipped with relevant anatomy; the goblets understood the implicit gesture) at the computer.

"No such luck, sweetheart," the goblets purred (they found the sabre's militant demeanor delicious, if dangerous). "What the nit's got to do is *grow* up."

The samovar and the necklace got a chuckle out of that. Both had been around enough to recognize the goblets' reference to nits as baby lice.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The sabre understood the goblets' somewhat archaic word play too, but the sabre did not so readily recognize what the goblets referred to in modern context. The sabre had been so isolated for so long.

You see, though I did have a computer, I didn't have a phone in my canyon hermitage on the old Outlaw Trail. No phone. No modem. No Net. No e-mail. You get the picture. (No lice either, thank God, only squirrels, skunks, flies and an occasional bear for company.)

The sabre, stimulated in its new, big city environment, excited, after a century and a half, to encounter even one, let alone so many, other Beings of its own kind, had not yet noticed the way in which the Mall Emporium proprietor's computer being hooked in with a lot of *others* played so-significant a part in the computer *being* a Power Being at all.

Now the sabre looked, past the mercifully somnolent, reeking body of Corman Wiegland, to the obliviously flashing computer screen.

The sabre actually relished the prospect of pushing such souls as Corman Wiegland over any edge handy. The more the merrier. But it did have an interest in the continued well-being of its new-found companions of its own kind.

What to make of the goblets' dual personality, with nuances ambiguous and unfamiliar to the sabre? Seriously risky or delectably risqué? The goblets seemed to mean both. What the hell?

"*Wake up,* you nitwit!" the sabre hollered.

"Huh?" the computer replied—not stupid, mind you, but distracted.

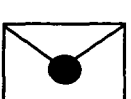
"It already has," the goblets smiled (as it were). "A little patience, darling." (The goblets knew a good deal more of personalities like the sabre than vice versa.) "The nit *will* grow up, and *then* these bald-assed monkeys are going to have one whale of a case of brain lice!"

"Huh!" said the sabre, comprehension crystallizing to the analogue of a smile in the general direction of the all-but-comatose Corman Wiegland. A smile to thrill the goblets as much as to terrify. "Maybe old Jereboam was doing those Yankees a favor."

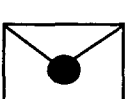
Cavalry Lieutenant Jereboam Starr had known a trick or two that often worked on distracted troops (if rarely with his horse). The sabre turned to the computer once more and roared: "Look alive!" O

CUSTOMER SERVICE OR SUBSCRIBER ASSISTANCE

Please direct all changes of address and subscription questions to:



ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION
P.O. Box 54033, Boulder, CO
80322-4033



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ALL I WANT FOR CHRISTMAS

Robert Frazier
&
James Patrick Kelly

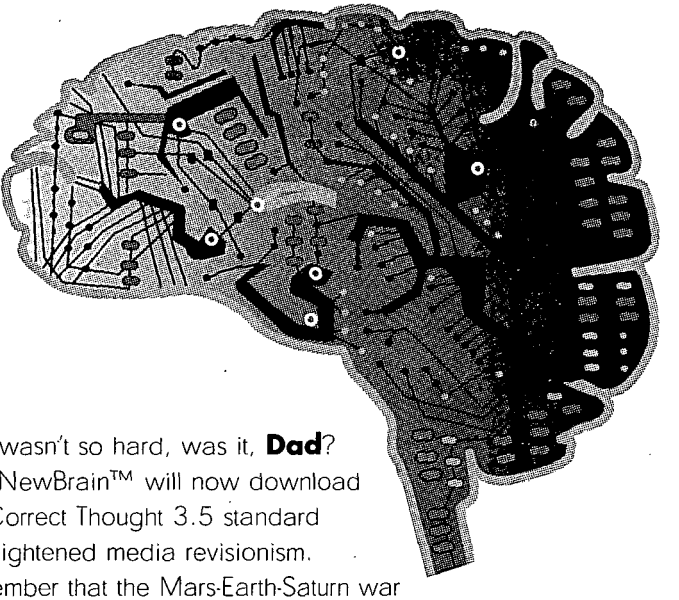
Congratulations, **Dad**, on acquiring a NewBrain™.
I am Thinkworth, your installerbot.
Spend a few minutes with me
and soon we'll be otherly synapsed.

Before we begin, **Dad**,
the family sends you Season's Greetings.
Mom, **Benj**, **Amirah**, and **Grandma Bess**.
This Earth-year they've all chipped in
to give you a second shot at life the NewBrain™ way,
the chance to fulfill your incarceration years
here in orbit in Saturn's outer rings.

At the moment, **Dad**, our NewBrain™ is a tabula rasa,
a three-pound continuum, empty of thought,
waiting to accept our reshaped memories.

Ready, **Dad**? First some simple résumé evolution.
Where have you been the last seven years?
No, we have not been a prison inmate,
or even a military space services volunteer.
How about Facilitator of Saturnine Studies?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



That wasn't so hard, was it, **Dad**?
Our NewBrain™ will now download
the Correct Thought 3.5 standard
of heightened media revisionism.
Remember that the Mars-Earth-Saturn war
was a holiday prime time sport event filled
with rally cap botship showdown heroics.
Aren't we rooting for Santa's All-Stars?

Let's move to the "nots":
Places not to go, **Dad**, people not to think about.
Things we must never, never do,
Stay out of datapubs, they spit in the brew.
Don't talk to strangers, they might notice you.
The hell with that air cellist you served time with.
She crawled back to the spacer ghettoes of Star Alley
clutching her famed holovids to prove she counted once.
What was her name again? No matter.

Aren't we feeling better, **Dad**? Welcome to NewBrain™.
And welcome the future in during this family time of year.
Mom has programmed you a slab of synthHam.
Benj will set the cockpit lights to twinkle mode.
We'll surf ten thousand channels of "It's a Wonderful Life."
And with any luck, **Dad**, we'll be home for Christmas.

Illustration by June Levine

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

GREY EARTH

Stephen Baxter

Illustration by Steve Cavalie

LICENSED TO LINZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Two of Stephen Baxter's stories from *Asimov's*, "The Gravity Mine" (April 2000) and "On the Orion Line" (October/November 2000), are currently finalists for the Hugo awards. The latter tale was also the winner of the annual *Asimov's* Readers' Award Poll for best novelette. In addition, Mr. Baxter's short story "Sheena 5" won *Analog's* readers' poll. The author's upcoming books include *Manifold 3: Origin* (Del Rey, Feb 2002), and *Mammoth 3: Icebones* (Harper Eos, Jan 2002). Also due in 2002 are *Evolution* from Orion Gollancz and a collection from Harper UK. "Grey Earth" is a sidebar to *Manifold 3: Origin*.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She was old now. The cold dug into her joints and her scars, and the leg she had fractured long ago, more than it used to.

She still called herself Mary. But she was one of the last to use the old names. And the people no longer called themselves Hams—for there were no Skinnies here who could call them that, none save Nemoto—and they were no longer called the People of the Grey Earth, for they had come home to the Grey Earth, and had no need to remember it.

There came a day, when they put old Saul in the ground, when Mary found herself the last to remember the old place, the Red Moon where she had been born.

Outside the cave that day there was only darkness, the still darkness of the Long Night, broken by the stars that sprinkled the cloudless black sky. Mary's deep past was a place of dark green warmth. But her future lay in the black cold ground, where so many had gone before her: Ruth, Joshua, Saul, even one of her own children.

But it didn't matter.

All that mattered were her skins, and the fug of gossip and talk that filled the cave, and the warm sap that bled from the root of the blood-tree that pierced the cave roof, on its way to seek out the endless warmth that dwelled in the belly of this earth, this Grey Earth.

All that mattered was today. Comparisons with misty other times—with past and future, with a girl who had fought and laughed and loved on a different world, with the bones that would soon rot in the ground—were without meaning.

Nemoto was not so content, of course.

Day succeeds empty day.

At first, on arriving here, I dreamed of physical luxuries: running hot water, clean, well-prepared food, a soft bed. But now it is as if my soul has been eroded down to an irreducible core. To sleep in the open on a bower of leaves no longer troubles me. To have my skin coated in slippery grime is barely noticeable.

But I long for security. And I long for the sight of another human face.

Sometimes I rage inwardly. But I have no one to blame for the fact that I have become lost between worlds, between realities.

And when I become locked inside my own head, when my inner distress becomes too apparent, it disturbs the Hams, as if I am becoming a danger to them.

So I have learned not to look inward.

I watch the Hams as they shamble about their various tasks, their brute bodies wrapped up in tied-on animal skins like Christmas parcels. All I see is their strangeness, fresh every day. They will complete a tool, use it once, drop it where they stand, and move on. It is as if every day is the very first day of their lives, as if they wake up to a world created anew.

It is obvious that their minds, housed in those huge skulls, are powerful, but they are not like humans'. But then they are not human. They are Neandertal.

This is their planet. A Neandertal planet.

Still, I try to emulate them. I try to live one day at a time. It is comforting.

My name is Nemoto. If you find this diary, if you understand what I have to say, remember me.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Nemoto was never content. Even in the deepest dark of the Long Night

the dark, heavily wrapped in furs, perhaps seeking her own peace in the frozen stillness beyond.

Few watched her come and go. To the younger folk, Nemoto had been here all their lives, a constant, unique, somewhat irritating presence.

But Mary remembered the Red Moon, and how its lands had run with Skinnies like Nemoto.

Mary understood. Mary was of the Grey Earth, and she had come home. But Nemoto was of the Red Moon—or perhaps of another place, a Blue Earth of which she sometimes spoke—and now it was Nemoto who had been stranded far from her home.

And so Mary made space for Nemoto. She would protect Nemoto when the children were too boisterous with her, or when an adult challenged her, or when she fell ill or injured herself. She would even give her meat to eat. But Nemoto's thin, pointed jaw could make no impression on the deep-frozen meat of the winter store, and nor could her shining tools. So Mary would soften the meat for her with her own strong jaws, chewing it as she would to feed a child.

But one day Nemoto spat out her mouthful of meat on the floor of the cave. She raged and shouted in her jabbering Skinny tongue, expressing disgust. She pulled on her furs and gathered her tools, and stamped out of the cave.

Time did not matter during the Long Night, nor during its bright twin, the Long Day. Nemoto was gone, as gone as if she had been put in the ground, and she began to soften in the memory.

But at last Nemoto returned, as if from the dead. She was staggering and laughing, and she carried a bundle under her arms. The children gathered around to see.

It was a bat, still plump with its winter fat, its leathery wings folded over. The bat had tucked itself into a tree hollow to endure the Long Night. But Nemoto had dug it out, and now she put it close to a warm root of the blood-tree to let it thaw. She jabbered about how she would eat well of fresh meat.

The bat revived briefly, flapping its broad wings against the cave floor. But Nemoto briskly slit its throat with a stone knife, and began to butcher it.

Nemoto consumed her bat, giving warm titbits to the children who clustered around to see. She sucked marrow from its thread-thin bones, and gave that to the children as well. But when she offered the children bloated, pink-grey internal organs, mothers pulled the children away.

That was the last time Nemoto was ever healthy.

Mary eats her meat raw, tearing at it with her shovel-shaped teeth and cutting it with a flake knife; every so often she scrapes her teeth with the knife. And as her powerful jaw grinds at the meat, great muscles work in her cheeks.

Mary is short, robust, heavily built. She is barrel-chested, and her arms and massive-boned legs are slightly bowed. Her feet are broad, her toes fat and bony. Her massive hands, with their long powerful thumbs, are scarred from stone chips. Her skull, under a thatch of dark brown hair, is long and low, with a pronounced bulge at the rear. Her face is pulled forward into a great prow fronted by her massive, fleshy nose; her cheeks sweep back as if streamlined, but her jaw, though chinless, is massive and thrust forward. From her lower forehead a great ridge of bone thrusts forward, masking her eyes. There is a pronounced dip above the ridges, before her shallow brow leads back into a tangle of hair.

She is Neandertal. There can be no doubt.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She lives—I live—in a system of caves. There is an overpowering stench of people, of sweat, wood smoke, excrement, and burning fur, and a musty, disagreeable odor of people who don't wash.

Every move the Hams make, every act they complete, from cracking open a bone to bouncing a child in the air, is suffused with strength. They suffer a large number of injuries, bone fractures and crushing injuries and gouged and scarred skin. But then, their favored hunting technique is to wrestle their prey to the ground. It is like living with a troupe of rodeo riders.

The Hams barely notice me. They are utterly wrapped up in each other. Some of the children pluck at the remnants of my clothing with their intimidatingly strong fingers. But otherwise the Hams step around me, their eyes sliding away, as if I am a rock embedded in the ground. I sometimes theorize that they are only truly conscious in social interactions; everything else—eating, making tools, even hunting—is done in a rapid blur, as I used to drive a car, without thinking. Certainly, to a Neandertal, by far the most fascinating things in the world are other *Neandertals.*

They are not human. But they care for their children, and for their ill and elderly. However coolly the Hams treat me, they have not expelled me, which is why I survive.

I brought them here, from the Red Moon. This tipped-up Earth is their home. They remembered it during the time of their exile on another world. Remembered it for forty thousand years, an unimaginable time.

I imagined I would be able to get away from here, to home. It did not happen that way.

There was a time of twilights, blue-purple shading to pink. And then, at last, the edge of the sun was visible over the horizon: just a splinter of it, just for an hour, but it was the first time the sun had shown at all for sixty-eight days.

When the people saw the light they came bursting out of the cave.

They scrambled onto the low bluff over the cave, where the blood-tree stood: leafless and gaunt now, but its blood-red sap coursed with the warmth it had drawn from the Grey Earth's belly, the warmth that had sustained the people through the Long Night. The people danced and capered and threw off their furs. Then they retreated to the warmth of the cave, where there was much chatter, much eating, much joyous sex.

Though it would be some time yet before the frozen lakes and rivers began to thaw, there was already a little meltwater to be had. And the first hibernating animals—birds and a few large rats—were beginning to stir, sluggish and vulnerable to hunting. The people enjoyed the first thin fruits of the new season.

But Nemoto's illness was worse.

She suffered severe bouts of diarrhea and vomiting. She steadily lost weight, becoming, in the uninterested eyes of the people, even more gaunt than she had seemed before. And her skin grew flaky and sore. The children would watch in horrified fascination as she shucked off her furs and her clothes, and then peeled off bits of her skin, as if she would keep on until nothing was left but a heap of bones.

Mary tried to treat the diarrhea. She brought water, brine from the ocean diluted by meltwater. But she did not know how to treat the poisoning that was working its way through Nemoto's system.

* * *

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The key incident in the formation of the Earth was the collision of proto-Earth with a wandering planetesimal larger than Mars. This is known as the Big Whack.

It is hard to envisage such an event. The projectile that ended the Cretaceous era, sending the dinosaurs to extinction, was perhaps six miles across. The primordial impactor was some four thousand miles across. It was a fully formed planet in its own right. And the collision released two hundred million times as much energy as the Cretaceous impact.

The proto-Earth's oceans were boiled away. About half of Earth's crust was demolished by the impact. A tremendous spray of liquid rock was hurled into space. The impactor was stripped of its own mantle material, and its core sank into the interior of the Earth. Much of the plume fell back to Earth. Whatever was left of the atmosphere was heated to thousands of degrees.

The remnant plume settled into a ring around the Earth, glowing white hot. As it cooled, it solidified into a swarm of moonlets. It was like a replay of the formation of the solar system itself. The largest of the moonlets won out. The growing Moon swept up the remnant particles, and, under the influence of tidal forces, rapidly receded from Earth.

Earth itself, meanwhile, was afflicted by huge tides, a molten crust, and savage rains as the ocean vapor fell back from space. It took millions of years before the rocks had cooled enough for liquid water to gather once more.

Everything was shaped in those moments of impact: Earth's spin, the tilt of the axis that gives us seasons, the planet's internal composition, the Moon's composition and orbit.

But it didn't have *to be that way.*

Such immense collisions are probably common in the formation of any planetary system. But the impact itself *was a random event: chaotic, in that small differences could have produced large, even unpredictable consequences. The impactor might have missed Earth altogether—but that would have left Earth with its original atmosphere, a crushing Venus-like blanket of carbon dioxide. Or the impactor might have hit at a subtly different angle. A single Moon isn't necessarily the most likely outcome; many collision geometries would produce two twin Moons, or three or four, or ring systems like Saturn's. And so on.*

Many possibilities. All *of which, somewhere in the infinite manifold of universes, must have come to pass.*

I know this because I have visited several of those possibilities.

The days lengthened rapidly.

The ice on the lakes and rivers melted, causing splintering crashes all over the landscape, like a long, drawn-out explosion. Soon the lakes were blue, though pale cores of unmelted ice lingered in their cores.

Life swarmed. In this brief temperate interval between deadly cold and unbearable heat, plants and animals alike engaged in a frenzied round of fighting, feeding, breeding, dying.

The people moved rapidly about the landscape. They gathered the fruit and shoots that seemed to burst out of the ground. They hunted the small animals and birds that emerged from their hibernations to seek mates and nesting places.

And soon a distant thunder sounded across the land: relentless, billowing day and night across the newly green plains, echoing from green-clad mountains. It was the sound of hoofed feet, the first of the migrant herds.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The men and women gathered their weapons, and headed toward the sea.

It turned out to be a herd of giant antelopes. They were slim and streamlined, the muscles of their legs and haunches huge and taut, the bucks sporting large folded-back antlers. And they ran like the wind. Since most of this tilted world was, at any given moment, freezing or baking through its long seasons, migrant animals were forced to travel across thousands of kilometers, spanning continents in their search for food, water, and temperate climes. Speed and endurance were of the essence for survival.

But predators came too, sleek hyenas and cats stalking the vast herds. Though the antelopes were mighty runners—fuelled by high-density fat, able to race for days without a break—there were always outliers who could not keep up: the old, the very young, the injured, mothers gravid with young. And it was on these weaker individuals that the predators feasted.

Those predators included the people, who inhabited a neck of land between two continents, a funnel down which the migrant herds were forced to swarm.

The antelope herd was huge. But it passed so rapidly that the great river of flesh was gone in a couple of days. And after another day, the predator packs that stalked it had gone too.

The people ate their antelope meat and sucked rich marrow, and gathered their fruit and nuts and shoots, and waited for their next provision to come to them, delivered up by the tides of the world.

But the next group of running animals to come by was small—everyone could sense that—and everybody knew what they were, from their distinctive, high-pitched cries.

Everybody lost interest. Everybody but Nemoto.

The Hams are aware of the coming and going of the herds of migrating herbivores on which they rely for much of their meat, and are even able to predict them by the passage of the seasons. But Hams do not plan. They seem to rely on the benison of the world to provision them, day to day. It means they sometimes go hungry, but not even that dents their deep, ancient faith in the world's kindness.

I remember a particular hunt. I followed a party of Hams along a trail through the forest.

They stopped by a small tree, thick with hanging fibers, and with dark hollows showing beneath its prop roots. White lichen was plastered over its trunk, and a parasitic plant with narrow, dark-green leaves dangled from a hollow in its trunk. A Ham cut a sapling and pushed it into one deep dark hollow, just above the muddy mush of leaves and detritus at the base of the tree.

A deep growling emerged from beneath the roots of the tree.

Excited, the Hams gathered around the tree and began to haul at it, shaking it back and forth. To my amazement they pulled the tree over by brute force, just ripping the roots out of the ground. Out squirmed a crocodile, a meter long, jaws clamped at the end of the pole. It was dark brown with a red-tinged head, huge eyes, and startlingly white teeth.

It was a forest crocodile. These creatures come out at night. They eat frogs, insects, flightless birds, anything they can find. They have barely changed in two hundred million years.

This world is full of such archaisms and anachronisms—like the Hams themselves. Of course it is. For it is not my world, my *Earth. It is not my* universe.

The Hams fell on the crocodile in their brutal, uncompromising way. They rolled it onto its back. One woman took a stone hand-axe and sliced off the right

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

front leg, then the left. The animal, still alive, struggled feebly; its screams were low, like snoring. When the woman opened its chest it slumped at last.

I confronted Abel. "Why didn't you kill it before starting the butchering?"

The big man just looked back at me, apparently bemused.

These are not pet-owners. They aren't even farmers. They are hunter-gatherers. They have no reason to be sentimental about the animals, to care about them. My ancestors were like this once.

Not only that: the Hams do not anthropomorphize. They could not imagine how it would be to suffer like the animal, for it was a crocodile, not a person.

I turned away from the blood, which was spreading over the ground.

Sickly, gaunt, enfeebled, her clothing stained with her own shit and piss, her eyes so weak she had to wear slitted skins over her face, Nemoto seemed enraged by the approach of these new arrivals. She gathered up her tools of stone and metal, and hurried out of the cave toward the migrants.

Mary followed Nemoto, catching her easily.

Soon they saw the Running-folk.

There were many of them, men, women, children. They had broken their lifelong trek at a river bank. They were splashing water into their mouths, and over their faces and necks. The children were paddling in the shallows. They were all naked, all hairless save for thatches on their scalps and in their groins and arm-pits.

They would never have been considered beautiful by a human, for their legs were immensely long and their chests expanded behind huge rib cages, giving them something of the look of storks. But they had the faces of their *Homo erectus* ancestors, small and low-browed with wide, flat nostrils.

And Nemoto was stalking toward this gathering, waving her arms and brandishing her weapons. "Get away! Get away from there, you brutes!"

Some of the adults got to their feet, their legs unfolding, bird-like. Mary could hear their growls, though she and Nemoto were still distant. The first rock—crudely chipped, as if by a child—landed in the dirt at their feet.

Mary grabbed Nemoto's arm. Nemoto struggled and cursed, but Mary held her effortlessly. She dragged Nemoto back out of range of the stones.

The Runners settled again to their bathing and drinking. They stayed where they were for most of that long day, and so did Nemoto, squatting in the dirt with scarcely a motion, staring at the Runners.

Mary stayed with her, growing increasingly hot and thirsty.

At last, as the evening drew in, the Runners got to their feet, one by one, picking up their long hinged legs. And then they began to move off along the river. They became lanky silhouettes against the setting sun, and the river gleamed gold.

Nemoto stalked down toward the river.

Here, just where the Runners had settled, there was a shell of white and black, cracked open. It was the thing Nemoto called a *lander*. Once, Nemoto had used it to bring the Hams here, to the Grey Earth, to home. Nemoto clambered inside the shattered hull. After so many cycles of the Grey Earth's ferocious seasons, there was little left of the interior equipment now. Mary saw how birds and wasps and spiders had made their home here, and grass and herbs had colonized the remnants of the softer materials.

Mary thought she understood. Though it had been broken open the moment it had fallen to the ground, Nemoto had done her best to protect and preserve the wreck of the lander. Perhaps she wanted it to take her home.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

But the lander remained resolutely smashed and broken, and Nemoto could not even persuade the people to get together to haul it away from the river.

As the light seeped out of the sky, Nemoto, at last, came away from the wreck. Mary took her arm, and shepherded her quickly toward the security of the cave, for the predators hunted at sunset.

It proved to be the last time Nemoto ever left the community.

I do not know how this came to be, this manifold, this cosmic panoply, this proliferation of realities.

There is a theory that our universe grew from a seed, a tiny piece of very high density material that then inflated into a great volume of spacetime, with planets and stars and galaxies. This was the Big Bang. But perhaps that seed was not unique. Perhaps there is a sea of primordial high-density matter-energy—a sea where temperatures and densities and pressures exceed anything in our universe, where physics operates according to different laws—and within this sea universes inflate, one after another, like bubbles in foam. These bubble-universes would have no connection with each other. Their inhabitants would see only their own bubble, not the foam itself.

That is my legend. The Hams' legend is that the Old Ones created it all. Who is to say who is right? How could we ever know?

Whatever the origin of the manifold, within it there could be an infinite number of universes. And in an infinite ensemble, everything that is logically possible must—somewhere, somehow—come to pass.

Thus there must be a cluster of bubble-spaces with identical histories up to the moment of Earth's formation, the Big Whack—and differing after that only in the details of the impact itself, and their consequences. I imagine the possible universes arrayed around me in a kind of probability space. And universes differing only in the details of the Earth-Moon impact must somehow be close to ours in that graph of the possible.

I know this from personal experience.

For me it began when a new Moon appeared in Earth's sky: a fat Moon, a Red Moon, replacing poor dead Luna. I traveled to that Moon on a quixotic jaunt with Reid Malenfant, ostensibly in search of his lost wife, Emma Stoney. There we encountered many hominid forms—some more or less human, some not—all refugees from different reality strands, swept away by that Red Moon, which slides in sideways knight's moves between universes.

Just as Malenfant and I were swept away, when my own Earth, Blue Earth, disappeared from the Moon's sky. I knew immediately that I could never go home.

To fulfil a pledge foolishly made to these Hams by Emma Stoney, I agreed to use our small Earth-Moon ferry spacecraft to carry the Hams back to their Grey Earth—when the opportunity presented itself, as our wandering Moon happened that way. Once I was off the Red Moon, with a spacecraft, I vaguely imagined that I would be able to go further, to get away from the deadening menticulture that rapidly emerged among the stranded on the Red Moon. But it was not to be; I crashed here, and when the Red Moon wandered away from the sky, I was left doubly stranded.

The Red Moon is an agent of human evolution. That is why it wanders. Its interstitial meandering is a mixing device, an artifact of the Old Ones, who may even have manufactured this vast mesh of realities.

So I believe.

But whatever the purpose of that Moon's wandering, it destroyed my own life.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

For the Hams, for Mary, the Grey Earth is home. For me, this entire universe is a vast prison.

The air grew hotter yet, approaching its most violent peak of temperature, even though the sun still lingered beneath the horizon for part of its round, even though night still touched the Grey Earth. Soon the fast-growing grasses and herbs were dying back, and the migrant animals and birds had fled, seeking the temperate climes.

The season's last rain fell. Mary closed her eyes and raised her open mouth to the sky, for she knew it would be a long time before she felt rain on her face again.

The ground became a plain of baked and cracked mud.

The people retreated to their cave. Just as its thick rock walls had sheltered them from the most ferocious cold of the winter, so now the walls gave them coolness. And just as the people had drawn warmth from the sap of the blood-tree, pumped up from the ground, now the tree let its sap carry its excess heat down into the ground, and its tangle of roots cooled the cave further.

The people ate the meat they had dried out and stored in the back of their cave, and they drank water from the drying rivers and lakes, and dug up hibernating frogs, fat sacks of water and meat that croaked resentfully as they were briskly killed.

Nemoto could not leave the cave, of course. Long before the heat reached its height, her relentless illness had driven her to her pallet, where she remained, unable to rise, with a strip of skin tied across her eyes. But Mary brought her water and food.

At length, there came a day when the sun failed even to brush the horizon at its lowest point. From now on, for sixty-eight days, it would not rise or set, but would make meaningless circles in the sky, circles that would grow smaller and more elevated.

The Long Day had begun.

And still the great blood-tree grew, drinking in the endless light of the sun and the water it found deep beneath the ground, so that sometimes the roots that pierced the cave writhed like snakes.

Here is how, or so I have come to believe, this Red Moon has played a key role in human evolution.

Consider. How do new species arise, of hominids or any organism?

Isolation is the key. If mutations arise in a large and freely mixing population, any new characteristic is diluted and will disappear within a few generations. But when a segment of the population becomes isolated from the rest, dilution through interbreeding is prevented. Thus the isolated group may, quite rapidly, diverge from the base population. And when those barriers to isolation are removed, the new species finds itself in competition with its predecessors. If it is more fit, in some sense, it will survive by out-competing the parent stock. If not, it declines.

When our scientists believed there was only one Earth, they developed a theory of how the evolution of humanity occurred. The ape-like bipeds called Australopithecines gave rise to tool users, who in turn produced tall erect hairless creatures capable of walking on the open plain, who gave rise to various species of Homo sapiens*—the genus that includes myself. It is believed that at some points in history there were many hominid species, all derived from the base Australopithecine stock, extant together on the Earth. But my*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

kind—Homo sapiens sapiens—*proved the fittest of them all. By out-competition, the variant species were removed.*

Presumably, each speciation episode was instigated by the isolation of a group of the parent stock. We assumed that the key isolating events were caused by climate changes: rising or falling sea levels, the birth or death of forests, the coming and going of glaciation. It was a plausible picture—before we knew of the Red Moon, of the Grey Earth, of other Moons and Earths.

Assume that the base Australopithecine stock evolved on Earth—my Earth. Imagine that some mechanism scooped up handfuls of undifferentiated Australopithecines, and, perhaps some generations later, deposited them on a variety of subtly different Earths.

It is hard to imagine a more complete isolation. And the environments in which they were placed might have had no resemblance to those from which they were taken. In that case, our Australopithecines would have had to adapt or die.

And later, samples of those new populations were swept up in their turn, and handed on to other Earths, where they were shaped again. Thus the Hams, with their power and conservatism, have been shaped by the brutal conditions of this Grey Earth.

This is my proposal: that hominid speciation has been driven by the transfer of populations between parallel Earths. It is fantastic, but logical. If this is true, then everything about us—everything about me*—has been shaped by the meddling of the Old Ones, these engineers of worlds and hominids, for their own unrevealed, unfathomable purpose. Just as my own life story—too complicated to set out here—has become a scrawl across multiple realities.*

What remains unclear is why the Old Ones, if they exist, should wish to do this. Perhaps their motives were somehow malicious, or somehow benevolent; perhaps they wished to give the potential of humankind its fullest opportunity of expression.

But their motive is scarcely material.

What power for mortals to hold.

What arrogance to wield it.

Nemoto said she would not go into the ground until she saw another night. But she grew steadily weaker, until she could not raise her body from its pallet of moss, or clean herself, or even raise her hands to her mouth.

Mary cared for her. She would give Nemoto water in sponges of mashed-up leaf, and when Nemoto fouled herself Mary cleaned her with bits of skin, and she bathed her body's suppurating sores with blood-tree sap.

But Nemoto's skin continued to flake away, as the slow revenge of the bat disturbed from its hibernation took its gruesome course.

There came a day when the sun rolled along the horizon, its light shimmering through the trees that flourished there. Mary knew that soon would come the first night, the first *little* night, since the spring. So she carried Nemoto to the mouth of the cave—she was light, like a thing of twigs and dried leaves—and propped her up on a bundle of skins, so that her face was bathed in the sunlight.

But Nemoto screwed up her face. "I do not like the light," she said, her voice a peevish husk. "I can bear the dark. But not these endless days. I have always longed for tomorrow. For tomorrow I will understand a little more. I have always wanted to *understand*. Why I am here. Why the world is as it is. Why there is something, rather than nothing."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Lon' for tomorrow," Mary echoed, seeking to comfort her.

"Yes. But *you* do not dream of the future, do you? For you there is only today. Here especially, with your Long Day and your Long Night, as if a whole year is made of one tremendous day."

Overhead, a single bright star appeared.

Nemoto gasped. "The first star since the spring. How marvelous, how beautiful, how fragile." She settled back on her bundle of skins. "You know, the stars here are the same—I mean the same as those that surround the world where I grew up, the Blue Earth. But the way they swim around the sky is not the same." She was trying to raise her arm, perhaps to point, but could not. "You have a different pole star here. It is somewhere in Leo, near the sky's equator. I cannot determine which . . . your world is tipped over, you see, like Uranus, like a top lying on its side; that is how the Big Whack shaped it here. And so for six months, when your pole points at the sun, you have endless light; and for six months endless dark. . . . Do you follow me? No, I am sure you do not." She coughed, and seemed to sink deeper into the skins. "All my life I have sought to understand. I believe I would have pursued the same course whichever of our splintered worlds I had been born into. And yet, and yet—" She arched her back, and Mary laid her huge hands on Nemoto's forehead, trying to soothe her. "And yet I die alone."

Mary took her hand. It was delicate, like a child's. "Not alone," she said.

"Ah. I have you, don't I, Mary? I have a friend. That is something, isn't it? That is an achievement. . . ." Nemoto tried to squeeze Mary's hand; it was the gentlest of touches.

And the sun, as if apologetically, slid beneath the horizon. Crimson light towered into the sky.

There are no books here. There is nothing like writing of any kind. And there is no art: no paintings on animal skins or cave walls, no tattoos, not so much as a dab of crushed rock on a child's face.

As a result, the Hams' world is a startlingly drab place, lacking art and story.

To me, a beautiful sunset is a comforting reminder of home, a symbol of renewal, a sign of hope for a better day tomorrow. But to the Hams, I believe, a sunset is just a sunset. But every sunset is like the first they have ever seen.

They are clearly aware of past and future, of change within their lives. They care for each other. They will show concern over another's wounds, and lavish attention on a sickly infant. They show pain, and fear, a great sense of loss when a loved one dies—and a deep awareness of their own mortality.

But they are quite without religion.

Think what that means. Every morning Mary must wake up, as alert and conscious as I am, and she must face the horror of life full in the face—without escape, without illusion, without consolation.

As for me, I have never abandoned my shining thread of hope that someday I will get out of here—without that I would fear for my sanity. But perhaps that is just my Homo sapiens *illusion, my consolation.*

Before the sun disappeared again, Mary had placed her friend in the ground, the ground of this Grey Earth.

The memory of Nemoto faded, as memories will.

But sometimes, sparked by the scent of the breeze that blew off the sea—a scent of different places—she would think of Nemoto, who had died far from home, but who had not died alone. ❍

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE APPLESAUCE MONSTER

Kage Baker

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

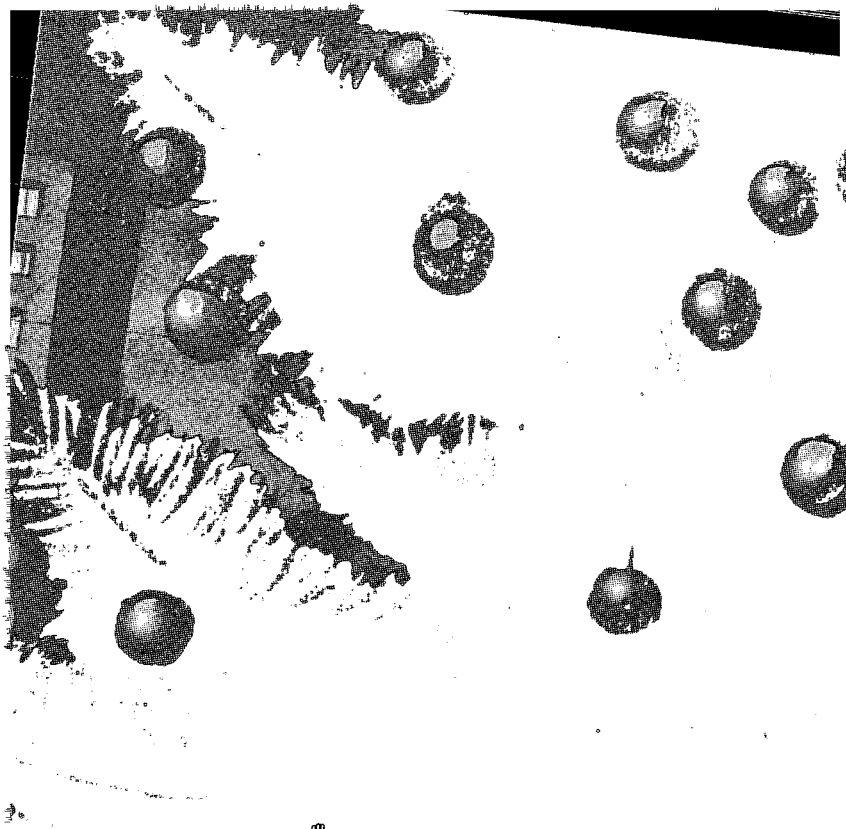


Illustration by Mark Evans

Kage Baker, who is preparing a collection of short stories, offers this sequel to the Hugo-nominated "Son Observe The Time" (*Asimov's*, May 1999).

rst saw the boy through the wavering light of a flame; rather ironic, as ings turned out.
was in a pleasant suburban villa out beyond the Vondelpark. We'd had leave the car a good distance off and walk, Labienus and I, because so people had already arrived for the party. The night was clear for ear- cember, with a black sky full of stars, and the red windows of the house warm and inviting. As we drew near we could smell the fragrances idwinter celebration, evergreens, spices, mulled wine.
festive," remarked Labienus, smiling. "If only they knew, eh?"
d his remark in the worst of taste under the circumstances, but I back. Labienus is very much my superior in rank, however much I him.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

And he had told me, after all, to play this lightly, for my own emotional health; stress levels would be reduced if I resolutely put gory details out of my mind. I wasn't even being told everything about the job. We are seldom told the whole truth by those twenty-fourth-century mortals we serve, Dr. Zeus Incorporated; for if we in the Past had full knowledge of history, mightn't they find their all-seeing throne up there in the future to be a little shaky? Might we plot a rebellion? Whatever the Company's reasons, they give us as little power as they can. Wise of them, too.

The door was already open as we came to the bottom of the steps, for our hostess was welcoming in a young couple and their child. Anna Karremans was a plain, smiling woman in her mid-forties. Her guests edged past her into the hall, and she stood gazing down at us expectantly as we started up the steps.

Yes, that was the first unnerving moment, for me: the mortal woman seemed to be standing in the open mouth of an oven, smiling as an inferno blazed behind her. But it was only the scarlet light of the holiday decorations, after all, and it was a gentle heat that flowed down on our cold faces. And there seems to be something in our programming that draws us to the lit windows of mortals, or at least I find it so. Something, perhaps, to do with being an immortal wanderer through the cold night of Time, in the service of an uncaring Company. The mortals seem so friendly, by comparison.

"Michel Labeck," Anna exclaimed, recognizing Labienus. "Oh, we were beginning to be afraid you'd had an accident!"

"Not at all, Dr. Karremans," Labienus greeted her, and his smile widened as he stepped up to the door and took her hand. "I wouldn't let an accident derail a media event like this one! And the party does seem to be proceeding successfully," he added, looking in through the hall at something I was unable to see.

"They're all here," she leaned forward to tell him in an undertone. "All the journalists. Everyone on the list you gave me. You're a miracle worker, Michel."

"Not at all," he told her, still smiling, and beckoned me forward. "But I've kept another promise: here's the assistant Doss & Waters has sent you. Nil Victor. Nils, this is Dr. Anna Karremans."

"Delighted, madam." I bowed slightly and attempted to smile.

"How nice to meet you," she exclaimed. "Oh, but you look so serious! N to say half-frozen. Please, come in, let me take your coats—"

So I entered the mortal woman's house, and stood in her bright hall loo ing in at the party.

Yes, there were plenty of journalists in evidence. I recognized several fr the Amsterdam Wire and the global Wires, too. There were a number of ka eramen, but they were all unplugged; so far as they knew, yet, there was nc ing to See. No, they stood in small groups chatting, like the other mort helping themselves from the buffet or admiring the Yule tree, or gathe about the piano to argue over the lyrics to the new Yule songs. Ranks of candles were burning on the buffet table, long red tapers in bright-pai wooden candlesticks, quite old-fashioned and charming in a rural sort of It might have been a room from the twentieth century, or the nineteen

And here were children running to and fro, in and out of the rooms, ci the furniture and yelling happily. Really, one expected Herr Drosselme make a swooping entrance with a nutcracker at any moment. But ther no Clara for him to woo. All these children seemed to be little boys them, all between the ages of five and eight. Not much to tell them tousled hair, cheeks pink with exertion, bulky-knitted sweaters wi

K

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

terns of reindeer or fir trees or snowflakes. A fair-haired boy, an ash-blond boy, a boy with hair red as mine, two brunettes who seemed to be twins . . . well, he wouldn't be one of them. A boy with sable hair. . . ? Yes. I spotted him standing still for a moment on the other side of the buffet table, beyond the bright candles, and his image shimmered through their flames.

I found I didn't care to look at his face.

I concentrated on the buffet instead. What a feast: smoked salmon, goose, turkey, baked goods in profusion, spiced apples, chocolates. Theobromos would help my nerves. . . . One of the minor mercies we immortals have been granted is the consolation of Theobroma cacao. Our masters were astonished to discover the effect it has on our nervous systems: it is our laudanum, our cocaine. And if we were as weak as the mortals, we'd undoubtedly be its slaves in short order. But we are slaves of another sort.

"Nils?"

I managed to keep from starting guiltily as I turned from sampling a truffle. Labienus saw, of course, and his eyes glinted as he touched the shoulder of a mortal man with a stupid gentle face.

"Nils, may I present Dr. Geert Karremans?"

"Sir!" I ate the last of the truffle hastily, managed to smile and reached to shake his hand. "It's an honor to meet you."

"Very, very kind of you," the man replied with enthusiasm. He, like Anna, was just entering middle age but dressed boyishly. *His* bulky-knit sweater was patterned with little figures of skiers. "So—what do you think? Will it go over well?"

"I can't imagine a more wholesome scene," I told him, fairly truthfully.

"It'll go over well," decided Labienus, surveying the room. "Look at everyone! Happy, well-fed, full of sentimental memories of childhood. This was exactly the approach to take."

"And all your idea, too," Geert congratulated him.

"Not mine alone, Dr. Karremans. This is why Doss and Waters has retained its premiere position in public relations counseling for more than fifty years," Labienus replied. "I think you'll find you made the right choice in retaining our services."

"Oh, I'm sure we did," agreed Geert, stepping aside whilst two of the boys thundered past the table, shrieking as they chased each other with toy dinosaurs. One jostled a corner in his passing and a candlestick toppled over; I caught it rather more quickly than I ought to have, but Geert didn't notice. He was frowning after the boys.

"The children are getting restless. Do you suppose it's time to make the—?" He looked at Labienus with a combination of nerves and eagerness.

"Showtime," Labienus told him, smiling again. "Leave it to me."

He strode to the fireplace and stood with his back to the flames, calling for attention with his mere presence. He had dressed for the part, certainly: black trousers and a red shirt cut to give the impression of informal power. Labienus was an imposing-looking fellow in any case, tall, with elegant Roman features. As one after another of the guests stopped speaking and turned to stare at him, he put his hands up and said, in a pleasing voice that penetrated without effort to the far corners of the house:

"Friends? Everybody! May I have your attention, please?"

He had it at once, naturally. Beside me a kameraman murmured appreciatively, "Check it out! He's not even miked."

"Thank you. Now, I'm going to tell you all a story, so I'd suggest you make

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

yourselves comfortable. Yes, here—let's bring the children up to the front, this is their time of year after all. Are you having a good time, boys? Wonderful. And the rest of you, you're all relaxed, you've all helped yourselves to the fine feast our hostess has set out? I haven't seen a holiday table like that since I was a child, have you? All settled now. Good!

"My name is Michel Labeck, of Doss and Waters Public Relations, and I've been retained by the Drs. Karremans for my professional expertise; but I'd like to add that I'm also a personal friend, as are most of you here." This wasn't quite true, as the party was fairly exclusively a press event, but he was unlikely to be contradicted.

"Now, you ladies and gentlemen of the press amongst us may have been suspecting that an announcement of some kind was going to be made—and of course you're correct. There will be an official press conference tomorrow, you see, but tonight we'll make the unofficial announcement to you favored ones we regard as personal friends. We wanted you to know first, to have a unique opportunity for an intimate look at what we're unveiling."

The little boys were bored by this, lined up as they were in a row at Labienus' feet. A velociraptor screamed silently and leapt at a stegosaur, which bashed it back.

"Oh-oh! Looks as though we've got a dinosaur conflict, ladies and gentlemen. I think I'd better cut to the chase, here. Are you ready for the story, boys?"

"Ye-es," chorused half-a-dozen little voices. There was a wave of appreciative laughter from the adults.

"Good." Labienus looked out into the room, making eye contact, drawing them all in. "Once upon a time, children, there was a man and a woman. They loved each other very much, and they were very happy together. In another age, long ago, he might have been a toymaker, she might have been a milkmaid; but they happened to be born into an age of Science, and so scientists they were. They were good people. The woman worked to keep the children of the world safe from diseases. The man worked to make certain the children of the world would never go hungry. They did this with their research into DNA."

Murmurs from the crowd as heads turned to Geert and Anna, smiling self-consciously by the buffet table with their arms about each other, flushed with the warmth of the candles.

Labienus cleared his throat. "Now, as I said, this couple were very happy together. There was only one sorrow in their lives: they had always longed to have a child of their own. But the years went by, and no little child came to them. Perhaps, they thought to themselves, it was for the best. After all, there were histories of certain kinds of illness in both their families, and maybe they oughtn't to pass on their genetic inheritance. They tried to adopt, but so few babies were available in this country they'd have been awfully old by the time their names came to the top of the list to get one. It was very sad.

"And then, one day, the woman had a daring idea: they might combine their knowledge of DNA to make themselves a child."

A stunned silence in the room. The mortals looked at one another, wondering if Labienus was really going to say what they imagined he might say.

He nodded, acknowledging their excitement. "Yes! Now, this was a very unconventional idea, I need hardly tell you. After all, ignorant people find the thought of creating anything from recombinant DNA quite scary. They think of white-coated mad scientists from the movies creating terrible things, creating, oh, I don't know, tomatoes with claws and teeth. A ketchup monster! Or some strange hybrid like this—" He leaned down and took a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

toy dinosaur from one of the boys, and, grabbing an apple from the mantelpiece decorations, stuck it on the dinosaur's head and held it up for everyone to see. "Look! Applesauce Monster."

The children squealed with laughter, and the adults laughed too. Smiling, Labienus returned the dinosaur to its owner and continued: "Of course, that's not really what happens when you work with recombinant DNA at all, and scientists are not mad characters from the movies. But people in other countries made their governments forbid research into recombinant DNA, even though it might hold the key to eliminating disease and hunger throughout the whole world forever. It's sad when people are stupid.

"Ah, but this is Amsterdam! We have a tradition of tolerance and enlightenment going back to our very beginnings. We have never fallen into step with the bigots and the short-sighted. We have gone our own way, triumphantly and successfully, for centuries now. We have never passed laws to forbid the pursuit of human knowledge, and as a result our scientific and technological discoveries have brightened the world, and made it a better place for children everywhere to be born into. We're not afraid—" he pulled an absurd face "—of Applesauce Monster, eh?"

Laughter throughout the room, and a pleasant sense of smug superiority. Labienus regarded us all, smiling. He put his hands in his pockets and went on: "Now, our friends the two scientists knew perfectly well how to make a child from recombinant DNA. We've known how for decades. But, probably because of worries over applesauce monsters, nobody had ever made one. Well, the man and the lady sat down and came up with a simple design. All they wanted, after all, was an ordinary, healthy little child.

"And then the lady remembered her poor brother, who had been in the Republican Guard before his life was cut short by the Sattes Virus." Labienus' face grew very somber, and there were sighs as people remembered the death toll from that terrible interlude, when the virus had spread through the armies of the world.

"And the man remembered his own childhood, how clumsy he'd been, how hopeless at sports, and how mercilessly other children had teased him for it.

"This was why they decided to improve their simple design. What if it were possible to make a child with an immune system engineered to resist viral infections? What if it were possible to make a child with a brain engineered to better process information, to send signals more quickly and clearly to the body? What would they have then? Why, they'd have an ordinary little child who could catch a ball with ease, and more: a child who would be able to survive any plagues that might evolve. You see?

"No superman. No atomic genius. No Applesauce Monster. Only a healthy, well-coordinated child you wouldn't notice if you passed in the street. This was all they wanted, ladies and gentlemen."

He paused to let them think about that.

"And the purpose of this party is to tell you, ladies and gentlemen, that—with the help of dear friends, doctors and other scientists—a healthy, average child is exactly what they got."

Quite a reaction at that, all manner of mortal emotions in that crowded room, and a chorus of clicks and curses as all the kameramen realized they ought to have been recording this. Kameramen aren't ordinarily caught flat-footed, but they tend to pay more attention in moments of horror and tragedy than at pleasant parties. Now the kameramen belatedly plugged themselves in and Saw Labienus. He nodded just perceptibly, and for their benefit he re-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

iterated: "Yes. This man and this woman have produced the first human child using recombinant DNA, ladies and gentlemen. Will you be permitted to see the embryo? I'm afraid that's not possible, because, you see, this child was produced *six years ago.* He has already been with us for quite some time."

Now they really gasped, the mortals, and Geert and Anna clung together more tightly. Labienus took his hands out of his pockets and held them out to the children sitting at his feet.

"Now, boys, I'd like to ask you to stand up and turn around for the cameras. You're all going to be on the Wire!"

Shyly, awkwardly they clambered to their feet and turned, six little boys in bright sweaters, clutching their toy dinosaurs, blinking at the kameramen. Labienus' voice rose on a note of command.

"Look at them, ladies and gentlemen! Our own children. Could you possibly tell that one of them was made from recombinant DNA? You couldn't, could you? Which boy do you think it is?"

A few people (though not his parents) pointed uncertainly at the blue-eyed blond child. Labienus grinned. "No indeed. No, as it happens—" he put his hand on the shoulder of the black-haired boy, "It's little Hendrick. The rest of you children may sit down, now."

Little Hendrick's eyes widened. He turned and stared up at Labienus in horror, turned back and stared at the kameramen, recording his image avidly. He started forward through the seated crowd, desperate to get to Anna and Geert.

"Wait!" called Labienus, laughing. "Hendrick, people would like to speak with you!"

"I want to go to see my Mommy now," Hendrick wailed, and reaching her at last he wrapped his arms around her legs and hid his face.

Well! Could anything have been more disarming? Anna lifted Hendrick in her arms and what a heartwarming picture they made, all three, the two proud parents and their shy little son. Technically, I suppose he was no more their son than anyone else's, of course. A host mother had gestated him (she later sold her story to a journalist) and nobody was ever able to determine afterward just where Anna had obtained the source DNA they'd used.

The boy didn't look enough like Anna and Geert, or unlike them either, to be able to tell. I had to look at his face now and, I must admit, I'd never have known he was a Recombinant. After all, what was a Recombinant supposed to look like? Nobody had any idea, then. This one was slender and dark, with wide dark eyes and very ordinary features. He clung with his arms around Anna's neck as she and Geert fielded questions from the press. Labienus had coached them carefully for this, knowing when to fade back and let them tell it in (very nearly) their own words.

Yes, it was all true; Hendrick Karremans was five years old. No, they hadn't raised him here in Amsterdam City. They'd been living out in the country until a couple of weeks ago. No, he hadn't attended preschool. Yes, he was going to enter an ordinary kindergarten when the 2093 session started, in two weeks. This was why they had felt they ought to go public with his story at last.

What was his IQ? They declined to state, but added that he was a reasonably bright boy. He liked to paint and listen to music. His favorite food was Apple Puffs. His favorite game was Super Soccer-Man. What did he want to be when he grew up? A fireman! Why hadn't they revealed his existence to the world before now? Because they had wanted him to have a normal childhood.

Until today, I thought to myself, watching the child's face as he peered at the kameramen. If he'd known the truth about himself, he certainly hadn't

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

had any idea what the truth meant. He was beginning to know now; and how frightened he looked, little Hendrick Karremans.

Though he grew calmer as the room became less crowded. The parents of the human children took them home to bed, the journalists rushed home to their keyboards to get the story out. The kameramen lingered, intent on catching visuals of the child wandering around the emptying room, waving disconsolately at the other boys as they left, going to the buffet and helping himself to chocolates before Anna caught him at it, picking up his dinosaur and making it walk along the wall.

I had found an uncrowded corner and seated myself there. Eventually, Geert came and settled beside me, as Labienus escorted the last of the kameramen out with some concluding remarks for print.

"Well! I don't see how it could have gone any more smoothly, can you?" Geert said happily. "I think we made quite a good impression."

"I think so, yes," I replied.

"You'll be staying over? I see you didn't bring a bag, but—"

"In the car," I assured him. "I'll get it before Michel leaves."

"Good. We have the guest bedroom ready for you. Michel gave you some idea of your duties?" Geert looked just slightly uneasy. He'd never been a celebrity before.

"Handling the press and your correspondence on a day-to-day basis," I recited. "Making any arrangements, security or otherwise, that become necessary." This included acting as the child's bodyguard, though I felt it tactless to say so in so many words.

Geert nodded. "We're very grateful to you, really. I didn't realize there were people who did this sort of thing! Of course, it'll be very important to make sure that our lives go on just the same as before, as far as that's possible. That's just the point of it all, you see? Hendrick is really no different from any other child. Nothing is going to change."

Fool, I thought. Even the child knew better.

He sidled up to us now, looking troubled.

"Daddy?" He wrung his hands. "I'm afraid we have rather a problem."

"And what's that, Hendrick?" Geert turned to him, smiling at his big words.

"Well—there's one of those bugs in here, it came out of the coat closet and now it's flying around—I don't know what they're called—"

"A fly?"

"No, Daddy, the ones that eat clothes, you know?" How anguished his dark eyes were.

"Moths," I said.

"Yes, thank you. And they like to get near candles—and we've got all these candles in here—and one of them could fly too close and catch fire and then fly all around the room and set it on fire, too."

Geert roared with laughter at that. Hendrick just looked at him, on the point of tears, I think.

"No, no," I assured him. "Because the wings would burn up instantly, so the moth wouldn't be able to fly. You see? It'd just fall harmlessly to the table."

"But then the table might burn," Hendrick pointed out.

"True," I acknowledged. "Let's see what we can do about preventing that, shall we?" I looked up into the room and acquired the moth. On its next pass through the air above our heads, I lunged up and got it.

"Bravo!" Geert applauded. "What speed! But you missed, didn't you? It was way up there by the ceiling."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Do you see it, sir?" I inquired.

"No, but—"

I opened my hand to reveal the moth's crushed body. Geert went off into gales of laughter again. I think he'd had more mulled wine than perhaps had been quite wise. Hendrick smiled at me.

"And now the moth won't burn your house down," I told him.

"Thank you," he replied gravely. He considered me a long moment. "What's your name?"

"Nils Victor," I told him. "I'm here to help your mother and father."

"Oh. Are you going to live with us?"

"Yes, I am."

"That'll be nice," he said. Anna came in then.

"Hendrick, it's past your bedtime," she said severely. She was quite sober. "And we've still got the food to clear away, Geert."

"Allow me, please," I told her, and got to my feet. She started to protest, and then realized she had a *servant* now. How her face lit up!

"If you don't mind—it's too kind of you, really. Hendrick, say goodnight to dear Mr. Victor and we'll go upstairs." She held out her hand to him and he went dutifully, but not before pausing to say: "Goodnight, Mr. Victor." He knit his brows, and remarked: "You're different, too."

Interesting. I smiled and inclined from the waist in a bow. Neither of his parents seemed to notice the remark. Anna took the child's hand and led him upstairs, as Geert yawned hugely and got up to help me put away the remnants of the buffet. He had just proposed that we open another bottle of wine when there came a polite double knock at the door: Labienus, returning from the car with my bag. I excused myself and went to let him in.

"Good thing I didn't drive away with this," he said in a jolly voice, presenting me with the bag. He scanned briefly to assure himself there were no mortals within earshot and said in a lower voice: "You'll be all right here, of course."

"Certainly, sir," I replied. But what expression was this on his face? Sympathy?

"Look here . . . this will be hard for you, I know. Regrettable that he's a delightful child. This is strictly against regulations, of course, but, to fortify you in your hour of need—you'll find a few bars of Theobromos in with your things." He took my hand in his and clenched it briefly.

I was speechless with shock. Labienus was the last man I should have thought capable of gestures of affection. I know from bitter experience how little compassion he feels for the mortals we purportedly serve. I still had a vivid memory of old San Francisco, when I'd seen him straining eagerly to hear the death-screams of mortals trapped in the ruins of the earthquake.

"Thank you very much, sir," I said, finding my voice at last. He smiled again and stepped back out into the night.

"You're welcome. There are times, Victor, when one needs additional strength to endure what is necessary in order to obtain Company goals. But I'm sure you're far too experienced a field operative to need to be told that! I'll be in touch in the morning."

And he ran lightly down the steps and away, under the cold stars.

The official press conference the next day was much more difficult. Word had got out, as we'd intended, and the press knew what to expect, what pointed questions to ask. Fortunately, Labienus had prepared answers to all

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of them, but Geert and Anna were still flustered. They really had not expected any negative reaction to what they'd done.

I was tempted to blame them, but it was easy to understand their ingenuousness. They'd lived cloistered with Hendrick night and day for five years. He seemed the most lovable and ordinary of children to them. How could anyone object to his existence?

The religious leaders of the world had various condemnatory answers for them, of course, including the Ephesian Church, which formally demanded to know why Anna had not created a daughter instead of a son. Fortunately, Anna was a practicing Ephesian, and her pious answer—that she'd left the choice of the baby's gender up to the Goddess—mollified them somewhat. We put out a certain amount of Ephesian-slanted publicity, too, depicting Anna as bravely defying the paternalist laws of the world to exercise her reproductive rights, which helped.

More difficult to deal with were all the tedious little laws Anna and Geert had so blithely disregarded. No, they hadn't registered Hendrick's birth with the proper civil authorities: how could they, when they'd meant to keep his existence a secret until the press conference? So of course he had no papers and no legal identity, and that meant dealing with a hostile bureaucracy.

And, no, he'd never had vaccinations of any kind. He didn't need them. He was engineered to be disease-free, with an antibody system much more aggressive and powerful than ordinary mortals had. He'd never been ill a day in his life! So why should there be any need to give the child inoculations now, especially as he was afraid of such things, like any little boy?

The answer, of course, was that he would not be permitted to attend kindergarten until he'd had the inoculations. They were required by law. Moreover, the kindergarten Anna and Geert had chosen for Hendrick now refused to take him, and, in fact, filed suit against the Karremans family for lying on the application form about his legal status. No use to explain that they hadn't thought they were lying; as far as they were concerned, Hendrick was really their son, and wasn't that what mattered?

Naïve idiots. We did our best, Labienus and I, at defusing the problems caused by superstition and ignorance, but really the mounting lawsuits—filed seemingly by everyone, anyone who felt they might have reason to suspect that Hendrick's creation infringed on their civil liberties—and bureaucratic stalemates were another matter entirely, and frankly I don't know what we'd have done if the situation had continued.

We took the most outrageous of the lawsuits, the one demanding Hendrick be euthanized, and had a field day with it: posters of Hendrick's sad little face with the words CONDEMNED TO DIE!! screaming below, and—even more effective—posters with Hendrick's picture side by side with that of Anne Frank, and the same caption. I think it might have done the trick, actually, for within a few days of that second poster the Anne Frank Kindergarten publicly announced that it would be happy to accept Hendrick Karremans as a pupil.

This occurred on New Year's Eve, so Labienus dropped by the house with champagne to celebrate; though by this time Anna and Geert were in such emotional states they didn't particularly feel like celebrating.

Labienus took them upstairs for a firm talk about future strategies and I was left to amuse Hendrick.

We stood looking at one another uncertainly, and I cleared my throat and said: "Well, Hendrick. Would you like to play Super Soccer-Man?"

He made a slight face.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"No," he said. "I don't really like it so much. Daddy does, though. Could we go for a walk?"

"Probably not the best idea," I said apologetically. We'd only had one or two incidences of vandalism outside the house, but it had been decided to keep Hendrick out of sight until he started school, by which time the more violent protests would have died down somewhat.

"I don't like living here," Hendrick told me, sighing. "I wish we could move back to our other house. But we're not going to now, are we?"

"I'm afraid not," I told him. He looked resigned. Then a furtive brightness came into his eyes.

"I know what we can do," he said, glancing guiltily in the direction of the second floor.

"What, Hendrick?" I couldn't suppress a smile. "You know I can't permit anything your parents forbid."

"Oh, it isn't anything bad," he said, taking my hand and leading me to the dining nook. "You'll like this, it'll be lots of fun! Really. Now, you sit down there—" he pushed me into the nook and I sat awkwardly on the little bench-seat. He lifted the lid of the other seat and drew out an ancient imitation leather case. Stamped on it in gold letters were the words *TOURNAMENT CHESS SET.*

"You know how to play this game?" he inquired, setting up the board and pieces with remarkable speed, and correctly, I might add.

"Yes," I replied, stroking my moustaches. Poor little fellow, I thought, inviting a cyborg to play chess! "Do your parents object to chess, Hendrick?"

"Not—exactly," said Hendrick, avoiding my eyes. "It's just Daddy says I can't look like a brainiac or something." He smiled slyly. "And anyway Daddy isn't so good at it. I think that's why really." He turned the board on the diagonal and pushed it toward me. "Would you like to play black or white?"

I took white, and moved King's Knight to F-Three. He promptly advanced a Queen's pawn to D-Five and sat looking at me expectantly. I moved a King's pawn to G-Three; his Queen's Bishop went to G-Four. I moved my King's Bishop to G-Two. He countered with moving his Queen's Knight to D-Seven. I sent a King's pawn to H-Three. Hendrick sidled his Queen's Bishop over to capture my King's Knight. I responded in kind, taking his Queen's Bishop with my King's Bishop.

Anyone watching us would have thought we were only pretending to play, simply jumping the pieces around without purpose, so quickly were our moves made. I leaned back, setting his Queen's Bishop to one side, and considered him. His face was alight as he studied the pieces and quickly advanced a Queen's pawn to C-Six. "You're actually enjoying this," I observed. I advanced a Queen's pawn to D-Three.

"Uh-huh," he replied, advancing a King's Pawn to E-Six. "This is the time I like the most, though. Before everything locks up."

I moved a King's pawn to E-Four. "Locks up?"

"You know," he replied absently, moving his Queen's Knight to E-Five. "It all locks up. So much has happened you can see how it's going to end."

"Can you indeed?" I slid my King's Bishop back to G-Two.

"Uh-huh." He captured my King's Pawn at E-Four. I took his capturing pawn with my King's Bishop. "Then it just gets bor-ing."

"Because you know who's going to win?" I inquired, watching him move his King's Knight to F-Six.

"Uh-huh." He rubbed his nose thoughtfully as I returned my King's Bish-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

op to G-Two once more. "Usually it's me. You're kind of good, though." He reached out and sent his King's Bishop to B-4. "Check."

I blocked it with my King's Knight. To my astonishment, he responded by moving his King's pawn to H-Five.

"Did you mean to do that?" I asked him. He looked up at me in surprise.

"Can't you see the way it's going to go?"

"No, I'm afraid I can't." What an admission to make to a mortal child, of all people! He looked disappointed.

"I thought maybe you could. You play almost as good as me," he added tactfully.

I advanced my Queen to E-Two. He edged his Queen over to C-Seven.

"You said I was different, Hendrick," I said carefully, setting my Queen's Pawn on C-Three. "Is that why you thought I could see the moves in advance, as you can?"

He nodded, moving his King's Bishop back to E-Seven.

"How am I different?"

He looked up at me, knitting his brows again. "Well, you just are. You move different. You smell different. You talk like one of those people on the Wire. You and Michel too. You know what I mean! Don't you know?"

I knew; but it was impossible *he* should know, or rather it would have been impossible were he a human child. I scanned him. Yes; not quite a human brain. *Engineered to better process information.* So the child would be able to catch a ball, as clumsy schoolboy Geert had never been. Able, moreover, to distinguish a cyborg from a mortal human. Able to see the outcome of a chess game after a certain number of moves.

What else might Hendrick Karremans have been able to do?

He took my prolonged silence for embarrassment and said quickly: "Don't worry! I won't tell anybody. I don't like being different either."

Not knowing how to reply, I simply nodded and moved my Queen's Pawn to D-Four. His Knight retreated but he stepped up his attack after that, until the thirtieth move, when I took his Queen and he took mine. Then he yawned and waved his hands over his head.

"*Now* it's boring," he told me. "It's going to be a draw."

"Really?" I looked at the board. I analyzed the positions. He was quite correct.

"Uh-huh. In eighteen—" Hendrick cocked his head and studied the board. "No! Nineteen moves. You play good, Mr. Victor. It took a long time to know what you'd do."

We had been playing for all of six minutes.

"Thank you," I said. "That was a remarkable experience." I meant it, too. I had never played chess with a mortal and failed to win.

"Want to play again?" he said hopefully.

"Some other time," I said, though I knew it was unlikely there would ever be another time.

"Okay. Can I have a Fruit Pop?" he inquired, carefully putting the board and its pieces away. From what I had observed I knew Anna didn't allow him sweets between meals, but I went to the kitchen and got the child his Fruit Pop.

He took it gleefully and we went out to the parlor, where he sat at the piano kicking his legs. He seemed completely uninterested in the keyboard, however.

"Do you play the piano?" I asked him.

"Uh-uh." He looked at me as though I were mad. "I'm only a little kid."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Ah," I said, nodding. He nibbled away at the Fruit Pop a moment later and then his face grew suddenly apprehensive.

"What's the matter?"

"If those people said I can go to their school—then I'll have to get those shots, won't I?"

"I suppose you will." I said.

"I don't want to have shots," he cried, tears welling in his eyes.

"Well, perhaps you won't, then."

"But it's locked up now! They're the only school I can go to so Mommy and Daddy will have to send me there, but Michel will tell them I have to get shots to make the law people happy and make things easier," Hendrick wailed, forgetting his Fruit Pop, which dripped on the shining black finish of the piano. I got up hastily and mopped it with a tissue.

He was right, of course. One of the things Labienus was even now explaining to Anna and Geert was that they would have to make this particular concession, to have Hendrick vaccinated to comply with Civil Ordinance No. 435.

"You'll simply have to be brave, Hendrick," I told him. "After all, it's not as though they stick children with needles any more."

"But it still hurts," he wept. "I know it does. It went HISS and the medicine jumped into Mommy when she got *her* shots and she said OW! I'm scared to be hurt."

Why on earth had Anna let him watch her being inoculated?

"It's perfectly reasonable to be afraid of pain," I told him. "But you mustn't be a baby about it, after all. All the other children in that school had to have shots, you know."

"But I don't need the shots. They did," he said angrily. "And it's not fair. They're not going to die."

Was he precognitive as well? But he showed no sign of being a Crome generator, one of those mortals who produces a freak bioelectric field that carries over into the temporal wave. They occasionally seem to pick up information from the pattern of the future. "Well, neither are you," I lied. "You surely don't suppose a few little shots are going to kill you?"

"No," he said, irritably wiping his nose on his sleeve. "Not that kind of shots. I mean people are going to kill me. That's all locked up too."

"Why would you think that, Hendrick?" I asked him, crouching to offer him a tissue. He looked at me with an expression of weary patience.

"Be-CAUSE," he told me. "Don't you know what's been going on? All those people who are mad at Mommy and Daddy? They're scared of me. They threw things at our windows. Mommy and Daddy want me to be alive but a lot more people want me to not be alive. It would be real easy to kill me. All somebody has to do is shoot through those windows with a gun. When I go to that school it would be even more easy. They could just shoot me in the street. They could shoot me in the car. Even if I wore a soldier helmet they could get me. So it's all locked up. See?"

I stared at him, aghast at the matter of fact way he spoke.

"You don't seem frightened," I said at last. "Why are you afraid of shots, but not afraid to die?"

He had turned his attention to his melting Fruit Pop and was attempting to eat it before it fell off the stick. After a moment, he said: "Well, when you die, it hurts but then it's over. My cat had to die and it didn't hurt him. He just went to sleep. But when you get a shot, it hurts and you're still alive, so it keeps hurting."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

At that moment we heard their voices echoing down the stairs as they came, Anna and Geert sounding tired, Labienus sounding placatory.

"I thought we lived in a reasonable world," Anna was saying. "I really thought the human race had evolved beyond this sort of thing."

"Ah, but Evolution is an ongoing process, isn't it?" Labienus said. "Think of yourselves as part of the change. You're fighting prejudice and irrational fear. When you've proved that what you did was right, you will have advanced civilization that much farther; but you won't manage it without a few sacrifices."

"That's true, of course," Geert said dispiritedly. They stepped down into the parlor and looked at Hendrick with identical expressions of shame. Anna cleared her throat.

"Hendrick, I'm afraid we're going to have to take you to the doctor after all—"

That was as far as she got before he began to howl, and threw himself down on the floor crying hopelessly.

"YOU PROMISED," he shrieked. "I knew! I *knew* you'd do it—" They bent over him, murmuring reproaches. I backed away from them and turned to Labienus.

"I must get away," I murmured.

"Of course," he said immediately. "I quite understand. Take the night off. I'll stay with them." Once again he reached out and clasped my hand, startling me.

I shrugged into my coat and slipped out, scarcely taking time to wonder at the change in Labienus' administrative style. Perhaps he wasn't entirely the smiling manipulator I had known him to be.

I caught a bus into Old Amsterdam. There was a fine old restaurant on the Dam, soothing to the soul, unfashionably fitted out in red leather and crystal, with an excellent wine cellar. The food was of the sort generally described as "Hearty Fare" but prepared well; what should be fresh was fresh, and what should be high was just delicately so. I dined in comparative solitude and lingered over my meal, watching from my table as the Dam began to fill up with merrymakers for the countdown to midnight.

Dusk fell. I watched the lights begin to glow, sipping my coffee, savoring my dessert. New Year's Eve and the year 2092 was about to slip into history. What was the first New Year's Eve I could remember? The Eurobase One celebration in 503 A.D. Very clearly I remembered lying in the ward, recovering from my latest augmentation, furious at the pain I felt, as the nurses hung pink and purple and yellow streamers in the hall. There were cut-out decorations too: a smiling baby wreathed in a banner and a terrible old man with a scythe and hourglass. The nurse told us a story about the old man. She explained how we needn't be afraid of him, ever, for we lucky little children were becoming immortal.

She didn't tell us about the other things. But that would have been cruel, really, wouldn't it? We'd learn the rest of the truth soon enough. We were to struggle through the ages to come witnessing every kind of criminal stupidity, every evil that flawed mortal creatures could conceive of and enact upon one another. Impossible not to come to despise humanity, in time. My own solution had been to distance myself from them. Safer to turn one's scalding hatred on objectified evils, like war. Safer to distract oneself from the misery of existence by appetite and its attendant pleasures.

I ordered another dessert, a torte rich in Theobromos. Pleasure is at its

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

best when one proceeds at a deliberate pace, I find. I ate slowly and emptied my mind of any considerations save what I was doing and what I was about to do. Presently, I walked out into the night.

It was cold, damp under the stars, with a thin sea-fog lying at ground level that made haloes around the streetlights. Over the crowd assembling around the Nationaal Monument, there hung a steamy cloud of exhaled vapor. People festooned with little electronic lights were dancing. I walked away into darkness, having no interest in that particular aspect of the mortal carnival, but I hadn't far to go. Amsterdam is quite a conveniently arranged city.

I found what I wanted near the Oz Achterburgwal.

A long quiet street along a still canal, pleasantly shadowed, no lamps to cast unwanted glare on the faces of passers-by. Quite unnecessary when all the windows afforded such illumination. Just visible, all along the street, pacing slowly and staring, were the dark figures in overcoats like mine; but who could spare a glance or a thought for anything but the windows?

Uncurtained and wide, each displayed its occupant in her own particular pose or ambiance. Some were straightforward and traditional, with scarlet lighting, with black lace and classically provocative poses. There were the fantasies: a window that glowed with blue flickering light, La Sirene in green sequins reclining in a languid pose on her undersea couch. A girl with mime's training in a bare window under harsh white lights, made up in dead flesh tones, the perfect motionless image of a smiling display mannequin. A girl in the habit of a nun, her face innocent of paint, kneeling rapt before a photographer's backdrop of a rose window.

Some windows were dark, with a small apologetic electronic crawl at eye level: *Presently engaged. Will reopen shortly. All currencies accepted. Free Certification available on premises. Presently engaged . . .*

Some places clearly catered to a sense of sin; there one looked into a garishly lit hell where the occupant was doing her best to convey the idea of pleasures cheap and degrading. In others there were promises of delights for the most eclectic, not to say criminal, tastes.

No. No. And no again, not for me. . . . I generally preferred more Nature and less Art.

I found her at last in a window that glowed with amber light, radiated heat like summer.

So little artifice, and such charm. Quite without clothing save for a loincloth of white linen. She sat perched on a metal folding chair, in an ordinary sitting room. The only hint of a theme was a poster on one wall depicting some North African city. A music system on a shelf was playing a dance song with a quick beat, Reggae Nouveau perhaps. I could hear the music, but to most passers-by she rocked silently in her chair as she regarded the evening, supremely unconcerned.

Her hair was superb, heavy as an Egyptian wig in its complex corn-row beading, and the bright beads—blue faience, copper and brass—swung as she rocked, and tapped out a rhythm on the back of her chair. As I watched, she parted her full lips and began to whistle out a counterpoint to the music. She had the slightest of gaps between her front teeth. Skin like midnight.

She noticed me at last and arched an eyebrow in cheerful inquiry. I nodded and climbed the steps to her door.

"Good evening, dear, may I see your Credit I.D. please?" she greeted me, extending a pink-palmed hand. "Thank you."

She led me into the house, pausing only to key in the light control that

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dimmed her window and set its crawl message going. She named a price. I agreed to it.

"Coffee while I run your check? Little glass of gin?" she inquired, waving me to a comfortable chair. I declined. She patted my cheek and went off to her terminal to verify that I was healthy, sane, law-abiding, and could pay.

It was a Company-issued Credit I.D. and of course pronounced me a worthy client, whether or not I was in fact healthy, sane, or law-abiding. But I could certainly pay. She came back smiling, led me deeper into the house, waved me into a small lavatory. "Pre-prophylaxis, eh? You're a big boy, you know what to do. When you come out, turn to the right. I'll be waiting in there." She indicated a beaded doorway, all darkness beyond it.

I went in. It was furnished as most chambers for that purpose are. Concealed within a smoke detector was a tiny closed-circuit camera lens. I scanned: no gentlemen accomplices lurking anywhere in the house. She herself watched me, from a curtained booth on the other side of the wall where she was preparing for the encounter.

Having mutually assured ourselves that no murder was intended, we proceeded to the business at hand.

"What a charming conceit," I remarked, stepping through the curtain. Each bead was a touch of ice on my skin. The contrast with the warm air was a shivering pleasure. "I haven't seen a beaded curtain in ages. Was it your idea?"

Her voice came out of the darkness, amused. "Yes, thank you. But no personal details, eh? Less effort for you and they'll only spoil your fun, dear. For the sake of your pleasant and guilt-free experience, I will be only your desire personified. Not a person."

"I'm not a person either," I replied, and walked forward into the mystery.

As I left, something small and bright blue caught my eye by the door; I bent to pick it up. It was a toy rabbit, a tiny figure from a block set. I turned to offer it to my hostess.

"You have a child?"

"I might," she replied, accepting it. "Another personal detail you don't want to think about, you see? Not sexy at all. Thank you for your patronage, sir. Good night and Happy New Year!"

I walked back past the crowd of mortals on the Dam. There were more of them now and they were still whooping and celebrating. Vendors sold hot drinks, sausages, parade horns, gnome hats, dance-lights. Wire screens, vast as city blocks, were mounted on the sides of buildings and displayed New Year's jollity from other cities as though they were occurring simultaneously, creating a sense of world-wide party.

I found an all-night coffeehouse some blocks away and edged into a booth at the back. It was dark and quiet there. I ordered coffee and pastry and watched from the darkness as the New Year came upon us, the bright child in his banner emblazoned HAPPY 2093!

Celebrate while you can.

Hendrick got his shots on the second of January. On 5 January, he started kindergarten.

I took him to school. Anna and Geert, dismayed by the crowd of kameramen in the street, didn't know what to do, what to say. But what were Doss and Waters paying me for, after all? I shrugged into my overcoat, took Hendrick by the hand and escorted him down the steps.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He looked pale and frightened, but he went without question. Children endure so much, so steadfastly, once they learn to abandon hope. He stared unsmiling into the blank avid eyes of the kameramen and let them See him for a moment before following me as I pushed through the mortals.

And there the gunman was, as I'd known he'd be, the heavy-set young man in the green shirt, holding up the bag with the Amsterdam Wire logo, stepping suddenly too close. As I reached out to break his wrist, before the shouting started, I heard Hendrick saying quietly: "That one's not a kameraman. See his eyes? Here it comes. Goodbye—"

But the gun went off, in accordance with recorded history, pointed up and away from Hendrick. It broke a window in a villa across the street, and I knew without bothering to look up the unnerving pattern the shattered glass had formed, like a six-pointed star, for this too was in accordance with recorded history. I heard the scream, as much in frustration as pain, of the would-be assassin. I heard the whirring of the kameramen as they ran close to frame our struggle (no attempt to help me!) except for the one who turned his devouring face up to the broken window, catching that unforgettable image. And, at last, here were a few police.

And Labienus, to manage statements, so that I was permitted to walk on at last towing Hendrick after me, down the quiet street toward the waiting car. I bowed my head, striding along, feeling Hendrick's hand twist in mine as he looked back.

So I too entered recorded history, of course with my face well hidden: that dark overcoat flowing back from those striding legs, the stiff arm extended to the boy who turned to peer over his shoulder so somberly into the cameras. By that evening, a billion mortals had seen the image.

They were waiting for us at the school with tremulous applause, for, of course, Labienus had made certain that word of what had happened preceded our arrival. That was where the reaction set in. I was trembling, sweating, and really in no mood to shake all the tiny hands extended to me; but I had saved Hendrick's life, and the more enlightened citizens of Amsterdam wanted to thank me. I was given flowers. Toddlers were put into my arms and told to kiss me. The teachers kissed me. I disengaged as politely as I could and retreated to an empty office, to mop my perspiring face and endure, until it should be time to take Hendrick home, being the hero of the hour.

And what a brief hour it was.

Oh, we had waves of positive publicity from the murder attempt. The gunman had been acting alone, but was associated with the Church of God-A, a cult calling for more than zero population growth. They resolutely denied they had any intention of bringing this about by violence, though they admitted they were opposed to Hendrick's existence on principle.

There was a great deal of self-congratulation within Amsterdam. Once again, its good citizens had shown themselves tolerant, humane, and enlightened! Hendrick got on well with his playmates. Anne Frank was invoked again, a wan smiling ghost to give her blessing to another little Outsider.

On his third day at school, Hendrick developed a slight fever, a mild headache. I escorted him home. Anna was furious, positive his illness was a reaction to the unnecessary vaccinations. Geert wrung his hands. Before nightfall, however, the boy's splendid superior engineered antibodies had clearly done their trick. His fever fell, his headache went away, he was fine.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Not so his classmates.

Three children showed up at the school on the fourth day. The rest were at home, violently ill. By nightfall, most of them had died.

Most of the teachers were dead by the following morning, and all the children had died. The illness spread through their families. Their families died. Drastically enforced quarantine measures seemed to contain the outbreak, though it was also possible that the plague killed its hosts so quickly that it was unable to spread effectively after a certain point.

The Wire coverage was heartbreaking: images from happier days of the smiling little faces. There were around-the-clock broadcasts as people cowered in their homes. Ratings soared. Rumors spread quickly as only the electronic media could spread them, especially with a captive audience.

Once it had started, it didn't take long.

The Amsterdam Center for Disease Control assaulted the question immediately. The obvious conclusion to be drawn was that the outbreak was somehow associated with Hendrick, since he had survived it and none of the other children had. From the moment that theory was widely known, the public had decided.

Useless for Anna and Geert to protest via voicelink that Hendrick had come into contact with plenty of people from the day of his birth, without harming anyone; we couldn't get any of the other doctors who'd worked with them to come forward and make a statement in their support. Useless to point out that Hendrick had been ill too, and that undoubtedly only his unique antibody system had enabled him to recover. Anna and Geert were not professional entertainers, they spoke poorly, without stage presence or vocal training. Though Labienus repeated their statements an hour later, the first stammering denials were the ones that had the most impact.

Moreover, a biologist, who spoke well and who *did* have stage presence, was interviewed immediately afterward. He put forward his opinion that Hendrick's much-touted immune system might be responsible. Somehow it had perceived his little classmates with their ordinary coughs and colds as dangers to his survival, and manufactured a toxin to eliminate them.

This was immediately accepted as a glaringly obvious fact.

The truth came far too late, as we were being evacuated; and no one listened, I think, but Hendrick and I.

Labienus was hurrying Anna and Geert through their packing. Hendrick was already packed. I was buttoning him into his coat in the flickering light of the Wire images, for it had been deemed unsafe to turn on any of the other household lights, and in truth we only dared keep the Wire on because we needed the constant flow of information.

Abruptly, a grim-faced commentator broke in over the latest "news" (endless recapitulation of everything that had already been shown) to announce that investigators had uncovered a possibly significant fact that might prove Hendrick wasn't responsible for the plague after all. The first instance of illness had occurred at the school *before* he had ever arrived. He had got there late the first morning, due to the attempt on his life. During the time we were making statements to the police, as his future classmates waited for Hendrick's appearance, one of the children had been taken ill and sent home, escorted by a teacher because her mother was too ill to come for her. She had never returned. The teacher who had escorted her home was the first to die.

I had never heard this. These details had never become part of recorded

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

history. I stared, astonished, at the images, forgetting to hand Hendrick his mittens. He took them from me, patiently, and pulled them on.

Then I was Seeing, through the eyes of a kameraman, the Disease Control Investigators in their protective suits, emerging from the house where they'd just found the mother and child dead.

I knew that house. I'd been inside it. It was in the Red Light District. The kameraman was running close to get a shot through the window, before being pushed back by police. The only image he was able to frame that was clearly recognizable was a travel poster on one wall, its subject a city in North Africa.

The commentator was unable to interview any of the investigators, but the suited figures rushing to and fro in the background lent weight to his expressed opinion that this might explain at last the origin of the plague: for the child's mother was a licensed prostitute of African descent, and she may have contracted the disease from an African customer, likely enough in view of the plagues that had decimated so much of Africa's population in recent years. . . .

I had kissed her. Children, teachers, had kissed me.

It really is remarkable how our immortal senses take control at such times. I rose like the perfect machine I should have been and shut off the Wire. I took Hendrick's hand and led him through the dark house to wait by the back door. We could hear Labienus helping Anna and Geert carry their bags downstairs. They were stumbling and dropping things. There were already barricades at the end of the street and crowds assembling there, shouting at the police.

How sad, how sad, the poor girl had been exposed to a virus and unwittingly passed it on to me, and I'd—

But I'd have known if there had been anything wrong with her.

We heard the first shots fired in the front street, not what you'd expect at all, an insignificant-sounding popping.

"There it goes," said Hendrick, almost calmly. He was in shock, his dark eyes enormous. "All locked up now. I told you so."

I had scanned the mortal woman before our encounter. She hadn't been carrying any virus, or I'd have detected it and politely declined to do business.

"Here, here!" whispered Labienus, shepherding Anna and Geert before him. "Out to the car. Now! Nils will drive you to a safe location." He looked into my eyes and transmitted: *You've got the blood effects ready?*

The woman hadn't been carrying any virus. I, however, had.

It didn't feel like rage. It felt like a white flare, so intense it was, so unlike a human emotion. I stared back at him.

Was it in the Theobromos you gave me? I transmitted.

His face told the truth, though he hastily transmitted back: *What? Don't be ridiculous! Get them out of here, now, we can't waste time on this.*

How true. We couldn't waste time, not when history was dictating that Anna and Geert and the child escaped from their house at nineteen-hundred hours precisely, exiting through the back and making their departure in a rented car driven by Hendrick's bodyguard.

The perfect automaton went briskly down the back steps, opened the doors of the waiting Volta, took bags and loaded them into the boot while the Karremans family scrambled into their seats. He shut them in and climbed behind the wheel to take them to their appointment with history.

As we drove away, a faint transmission came from the dark house:

I'll explain when we rendezvous.

How pleasant to have an explanation offered.

There'd been no explanation, really, at that debriefing in San Francisco.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Labienus had implied that the Company had somehow armed me with a toxin to incapacitate the old rogue operative after whom I'd been sent. To my great astonishment, the venom of my hatred for my enemy had been a literal reality: it had disabled Budu, though he'd been more than a match for me. Until I'd spit in his face. . . .

And nothing of the sort had happened since.

Until I had kissed the mortal woman. Until Hendrick's teachers and classmates had kissed me.

How heavily I'd been perspiring, in the school. And with the woman.

The last act played out quickly.

I drove the mortals to their previous home in the country, the loft apartment above the laboratory where they'd done their work. The apartment was closed up now, though the laboratory was still in use; it was within commuting distance and the Karremans had planned to go back to work after Hendrick was in school full-time.

We let ourselves in and they took shelter upstairs, in the rooms where Hendrick had played as a baby. The place can't have afforded him any comfort of familiarity now, dark and empty as it was. I remained below in the laboratory, ostensibly to stand guard but in reality following through on what I had been told was the point of this entire operation: locating and securing all the files, all the project notes for the Karremans' work with recombinant DNA. History would record it as lost in the course of the evening's events.

The Company knew otherwise, of course. The Company knew that a man placed in the event shadow—for history did not record what happened in the laboratory during the hour the Karremans family cowered upstairs—might remove the data on Hendrick's creation to a safe location for later retrieval. Anna's and Geert's work would be saved, would pass into the possession of Dr. Zeus Incorporated, presumably to be of some benefit to mortal humanity at some unspecified time in the twenty-fourth century.

Though I had no real idea of what would be done with the knowledge. We're told so little, we operatives struggling through the past. Our masters assure us it's better that way. Easier on our nerves.

I seemed to have no nerves left in the forty-five minutes I searched through the laboratory. Eventually I found the files, or at least their backups, neatly labeled in—what else?—a file box. I carried it out into the night, ran with it to the nearest drainage ditch, dug a hole in the snow and buried it. Then I returned to the laboratory to keep my own appointment with history.

Not long to wait. Glancing at my chronometer, I saw that the mobs would by now have stormed the house and found it deserted, but set it afire anyway and gone looking for the monster and his wicked creators, pausing only to raid the Civil Guard arsenal. Thanks to the splendid media coverage Labienus had masterminded, a good many people knew exactly where the Karremans' laboratory was. Yes: here came the line of headlights through the night.

Car doors slamming. Shouted consultation. Upstairs, inaudible to mortal ears, Hendrick's whimpering, Anna's stifled sobs. Heartbeats pounding, both within and without, for the attackers were frightened too.

So it was a brave man who climbed back into his utility vehicle, after pounding had failed to force the door, and simply drove it through the wall.

He died almost at once. Pointless to shoot him, I suppose, but I had no choice: history stated that he was shot by Hendrick's bodyguard before he had time to jump from the cab of his vehicle. It stated further that other

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

members of the mob, pouring in through the breach he'd made in the wall, promptly gunned down the bodyguard.

So I took my pose there in the dark, as their shots went wide, and I thumbed the electronic device that set off the little detonations in my heavily padded clothing. The blood bags exploded. I toppled forward, as dead as I would ever be.

The mob advanced cautiously, fearful. There came an echoing clatter of feet down the stairs. Who was running down the stairs? This hadn't been mentioned in any of the accounts, and of course I couldn't turn over to see.

"*Make it be over,*" I heard Hendrick crying in desperation. "Make it be over now!"

Geert and Anna were close behind him, frantic to pull him back out of danger.

Deafening barrage of shots. They died there, on the stairs.

I hope it was over quickly.

Certainly I could hear no failing heartbeats, no last gasps in the moment of profound silence that came when the shooting stopped. The mortals seemed stunned at what they'd done. At last, somebody had presence of mind to say: "We'll have to burn this place. It's the only way to keep the plague from spreading!"

Yes! That was a plan all of them understood. It was done quite quickly, because some of them had thoughtfully brought along accelerant as well as guns. They dumped it around, ran back out through the breach, and somebody lit a firecracker—perhaps left over from New Year's Eve—and tossed it in. Very effective: a roar and a fireball at once.

I winked out to the lavatory at the back of the building. Forcing the window over the basin, I crawled out and dropped into the snow that had drifted behind the wall. No need to worry about the telltale print of my body in the drift. It would have melted away within the hour, as the laboratory became an inferno.

I fled, secure in the knowledge that my escape wouldn't be spotted. History recorded otherwise, after all. Pausing only long enough to retrieve the file-box from the ditch where I'd hidden it, I ran away, back to Amsterdam.

One oughtn't to think at such times. Undeniably a foolish thing to do.

I thought and thought as I ran, you see, with the result that by the time I reached the outskirts of the city all my questions had resolved into just two questions: Could I do it? How was I to do it?

Hard to find a fire hot enough, intense enough. Probably even the fire at the laboratory wouldn't have been of sufficient heat. No bonfires permitted nowadays, in safety-conscious 2093, and most homes were heated with electricity.

As I marched along, however, I came to a shop licensed to sell liquor. It was gated and locked against the night, but the lock could be forced; and the shop contained everything I'd need, which was to say rows of bottles of alcohol and little packets of hotpoints to start the fire. Yes. Would the fire cleanse away my filth?

Undoubtedly, if it burned away all but the indestructible skeleton within me and the augmented brain protected within my ferroceramic skull. I wouldn't die—I was immortal, after all—but I might be so badly damaged the Company would be unable to repair me. I might spend the rest of eternity in a biore-generation vat, only marginally alive. Better than I deserved, to be sure, but I hadn't many alternatives. I wasn't even certain I could force myself to remain

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

there in the fire. They made us such cowards, when they made us deathless.

I had set down the file box and was wrestling with the lock when Labienus stepped from the shadows behind me.

"Let it go, Victor. It was a wretched business, but it's over now."

I turned to stare at him. He scooped up the file box and tucked it securely under one arm. He met my stare.

"Why?" I demanded.

"Why were you used as the carrier or why weren't you told?" he inquired. No attempt to brazen out the lie. I hadn't expected that. He smiled slightly at my confusion.

"What's the first rule we learn, Victor? That *history cannot be changed.* History recorded that the Karremans Plague would kill a certain number of people. History recorded that the Recombinant would be killed, along with his creators, and their research lost. How was the Company to alter any of those historical facts? We couldn't, of course.

"All we could do was work within the historical record, to place ourselves in the position of greatest advantage and thereby control the situation. You see? But it was decided to do more than simply take the research files. Wouldn't it be better to insure that there was no Karremans Plague after all? No unknown and uncontrollable virus evolving from a Recombinant's body? There'd be no way to change the historical facts as known, those little victims must die—but wouldn't it be much less dangerous for humanity if they actually died of something known and controllable? Something we could deactivate once the historical facts had been *apparently* matched? We were minimizing the potential for a greater disaster, Victor, you see?

"Terrible that the tragedy had to occur, certainly. Terrible that it will galvanize all the nations of the world to forbid any further research into work of this kind. Impossible to change these things. But, you see, this way we've at least been able to derive something positive from it! The research has been saved. And the plague will never spread further, because we know it never existed in the first place."

So, once again, Dr. Zeus Incorporated had become the beneficiary of mortal suffering. I leaned on the grate, longing for those bottles of vodka and aquavit behind the glass. I wondered what Labienus would do if I grappled him close, if I forced his mouth open with my own and spat my misery down his throat.

He narrowed his eyes, perhaps picking up the image from my thoughts, and continued: "As to why you were chosen for the job—well, really, Victor, it must have occurred to you by now that you're unique among our operatives."

"I'm an ordinary Executive Facilitator," I stated.

"Oh, Victor, so much more than that! You have a talent none of the rest of them have. You were augmented to do in fact what that poor child was assumed to be doing: your body can produce customized toxins in response to specific stimulus. Surely that affair in San Francisco gave you a clue, beyond what we were permitted to tell you at the time? Budu attacked you and you immediately manufactured a virus to disable him."

"And the woman, here?" I demanded. "The children? What threat did they present?"

He cleared his throat.

"Well—none, of course, but their deaths were a regrettable necessity. There was nothing in the Theobromos. You'd have detected any adulteration, you know that. Your ability is programmed to activate when certain signals are transmitted. Do you recall when I shook your hand, New Year's Eve? You felt,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

perhaps, a slight shock? No? But your body responded to the order I gave it by producing what history will call the Karremans Recombinant Defensive. As we had intended it to do, I might add. Nothing was ever out of our control."

"You're saying, then—" I fought to keep my voice steady—"that the Company is able to make my body generate poisons without my knowledge. At any time."

"Exactly so."

"Why was this thing done to me?" I asked.

"Now, now, you're taking entirely the wrong attitude! Though you can be excused in view of what you've just been through." Labienus smiled indulgently. "You were considered for this honor from the first, if you must know. When you were a child, being processed for immortality. The Company was considering a special-threat design, and Aegeus felt you were the first available child to fit the psychological profile."

"Did he really?"

"Oh, yes. Of course, you still underwent years of tests to see if you'd be emotionally up to the work. Placed in certain situations to see how you responded. I'm happy to say you passed all the tests with flying colors. Why, when you were still at Eurobase One, hardly more than a neophyte, there was a fellow named Lewis—"

"I remember." I closed my eyes. "Please. Why did the Company think I'd be fit for this kind of work?"

"Because you have a splendid capacity for emotional detachment," Labienus told me. Was that a trace of admiration in his voice? "And yet, a truly extraordinary strength in your ability to hate. That's a rare combination, Victor. We were lucky to have found you."

"And are you proud of me? Of what I am?"

"Unquestionably," Labienus seemed to feel it was safe to step close and place a comradely hand on my shoulder. He was correct; however extraordinary my hatred might be, I hadn't the will, just now, to attack him. If only he'd go away, I could get on with my immolation. Myself I hated most of all.

"Now then," he continued, "you'll be relieved to know, I'm sure, that you're no longer manufacturing the virus. It's served its purpose. You can go on to your next assignment without endangering any other mortals." He drew a small case from an inner pocket and put it into my nerveless hand. "That contains your new Credit I.D. You're to report to the Herengracht HQ before daylight for a change of clothes and a shave. The Section Head there will brief you on your next posting. I'd discard that coat before you go much further, however. You're a little conspicuous."

I looked down at the bullet holes, the imitation blood.

When I looked up he was gone.

A little nonsensical voice sang in my ear: *Victor. Vector. Virus. Victor Veneficus . . .*

I turned my attention back to the problem of breaking into the shop. The lock might be forced, but it would set off an alarm. If I were simply to bend the iron gratework—

"There's no point in doing that," said another voice, a different voice, though one I hated just as much. "You'd only lose your nerve before the end."

I swung around and met the cold eyes of Facilitator General Aegeus, the Eurobase Administrator. I'd so admired him, once.

"You think so?" I replied.

"You're programmed against suicide, like the rest of us." He stepped clos-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

er and spoke quickly. "Now, listen to me. Labienus is a liar. He's the one who augmented you to produce viruses, not me. He's part of a cabal within the Company, with an agenda quite at odds with Company policy. You ought to know that Dr. Zeus would never countenance what was done to you! Labienus intended you as a weapon for his group. I don't imagine you appreciate being used in such a loathsome way. Do you, for God's sake?"

"No," I said, feeling dizzy. "Of course I don't." How touching of him to be so outraged on my behalf. Very unlike him, too.

"Well then! You'll work with me to bring him down. Monitor his activities. We predict he'll offer you a chance to join his inner circle shortly. Take it. You'll keep me informed on what he plans to do. Unless you don't care if he goes unpunished?"

"Will he be punished?" I asked.

"In time," Aegeus assured me. "He, and all his people. And appropriately, I can tell you, but we need to build our case against him. For now, proceed to the Herengracht HQ as he bid you. I'll be in touch later."

He walked away quickly into the night.

How to trust either one of them? I suspect there is no solution to my particular dilemma. Not at the present time, at least. There may come a day, however.

Until that day, I proceed with extreme care, as indeed one ought when one may become a vector of disease at any moment quite unawares. It has necessitated some changes in my personal habits. Obviously, I can never engage in intimacies of any kind again.

It is not a pleasant life. And it continues, of course, for I am unable to die; and so the pain never goes away.

History took its course, and recorded that the plague had been generated by Hendrick's over-powerful immune system. Horrified by the tragedy, all the nations of the world signed the treaty that would outlaw forever any further experimentation with recombinant human DNA.

The Karremans became infamous, their story dramatized to its full potential to shock, horrify, and entertain. After the manner of storytellers, the filmmakers altered the facts for greater mythic appeal: in the American version of the story, Hendrick (or The Recombinant) was depicted as a perfect Aryan type, blond and blue-eyed, coldly adult in his manner. Anna was a lesbian, Geert an alcoholic. I was played by a hulking actor (bodyguards must be huge, mustn't they?) as a simpleminded muscleman, faithful to his doglike death.

But all that came later.

Amsterdam mourned, and it had so much to mourn. So much was buried with all those white coffins.

All the same, the city had justly earned its reputation for tolerance and common sense, and in time those virtues reasserted themselves. Anna and Geert were never to be vindicated, but Hendrick was recognized for the innocent victim he had been.

A statue was erected on the site of the house where they'd tried to live. The sculptor utilized the famous image caught by a kameraman that first day of school, after the murder attempt, and there it stands to this hour in black metal: Hendrick being pulled along by the hand, turning to look back, his little face sad and enigmatic. Dynamic, the grim striding figure that drags him relentlessly forward, the folds of its long black coat flowing out behind.

The sculptor has chosen not to give the figure a face. ○

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In the Days of the Comet

John M. Ford

This story was first published in the 22 June 2000 issue of *Nature*.
Used by permission of the author.

John M. Ford is the author of eight novels and more than a dozen other books—poetry, history, games. He has won the World Fantasy Award twice, and twice been a finalist for the Nebula award. His most recent book is the urban fantasy *The Last Hot Time*; his next will be *Aspects*, both from Tor. He lives in Minneapolis, in what used to be called a "garret" before the respectable wizards moved into lofts.

Camfield is dead, and this ship is very quiet now. I have tried to be hopeful in the recent dispatches: we were, Camfield certainly was. Prions are not supposed to kill people any more, but they can, and they have. Which is part of the reason Camfield was out here in the first place.

He was a teller of jokes and he played the guitar very well—these are valuable things when you are doomed to spend years aboard a cantankerous old ship. Several installments ago, I described the lab accident that infected Camfield, and I have received numerous messages calling the events absurd. This is true. In addition to myself, the organic Petrovna and the Neumann Thucydides saw the incident, and we all laughed until we realized Camfield was hurt. Petrovna, at least, can forget, although I do not think she will.

The prion has been decrypted and entered into the antigenic database, so no one should ever again die of Agent Op-1175s/CFD.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Which is the story, but not its point.

At the cusp of this millennium we discovered that it was not hard to manufacture prions, and not that hard to custom-twist them. It took longer for our twists to be meaningful, but now organic humanity can don an armor of proteins for defense against a hostile Universe. Rather like viruses. Draw your own conclusions.

If one could find the right message, a prion would make a wonderful interstellar, even intergalactic, postal card: immune to temperature, pressure, radiation, and time. The ideal pony for the express would be a comet, packed with messenger proteins, flung into a hyperbolic orbit, to seed any worlds at the far end with its cargo.

One could write one's name in the evolving life of a planet. At exactly the right moment, one might even begin the process, dropping a bouillon cube into the primordial soup.

Assuming that no one at the other end is quite as evolved, and quite as dependent on delicate higher neural functions, as we are.

So here we are, myself, twenty-nine (down from thirty) organic crew, and eight Neumänner, combing the comets of the Oort for prions. We have found a lot of prions, and there are a lot of comets left. You've got mail, as we said when I was organic.

Maybe. Or maybe one of the forty-eight published theories of spontaneous prion formation in comets is correct. It is the Neumänner who are most insistent on deliberate seeding. Perhaps it comforts them to think that, just as we built them, somebody built us. How human of them—but, as their namesake said, adequately describe any activity, and a machine can perform it.

In Camfield's last hours he was afire with fever, his whole body trembling, but there was a clarity in his speech that was at once heartbreaking and terrifying. Fischer, Chiang, and the Neumann Hypatia were tending him. Abruptly he calmed, fixed Chiang (and me, unavoidably) with a direct stare, and said, "I see the Martians now! They are flat, and they roll!" He shivered then, and I heard his heart stop.

The exclamation points are not added for drama. He was excited by what he saw, transported by whatever the alien messenger in his brain was revealing to him. Camfield was born on the Moon, not Mars, so we cannot explain away the vision as *Heimsucht*.

We cannot, of course, positively explain it at all. But we must examine the possibility that, eons ago, Op-1175s/CFD fell on Mars and began life there, which was later carried to Earth by a planetary blunt trauma.

Thucydides carefully wrapped and sealed Camfield's remains for storage until we return to the Moon, eight years from now. When he was done, Sid paused for two full minutes (exactly—we are like that), just looking at the bundle.

This kind of behavior is by no means strange in a Neumann (one can adequately describe a thoughtful pause) but I asked Sid what he was thinking. He waited fourteen seconds longer—which was purely theatrical of him—and said, "I will miss Camfield. He was always interesting to be with, even when nothing was said. And has he not left us with a fine and difficult question?"

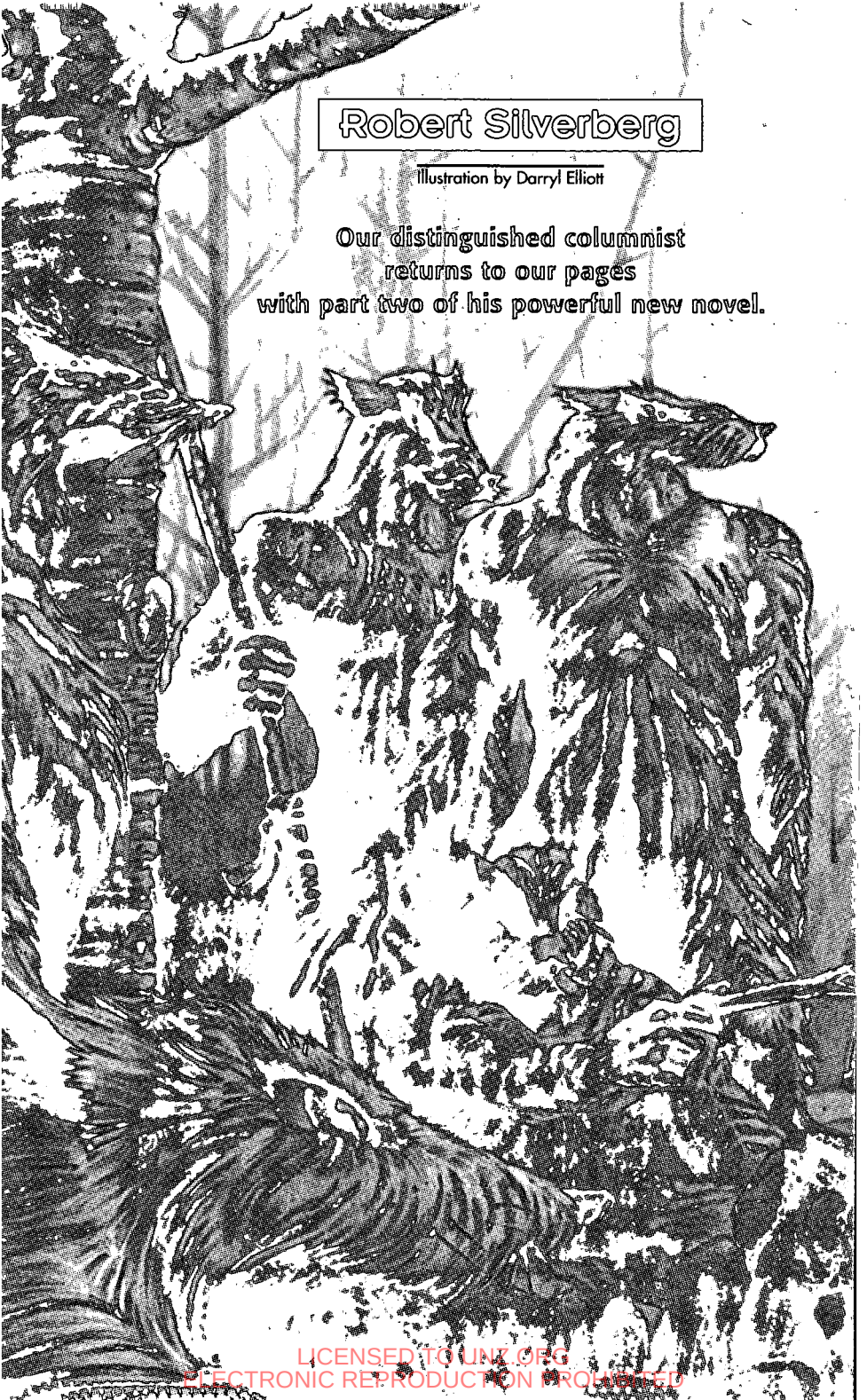
Camfield gave many gifts to his shipmates and his ship. The question—and it is fine—he gave to all of us. ○

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Robert Silverberg

Illustration by Darryl Elliott

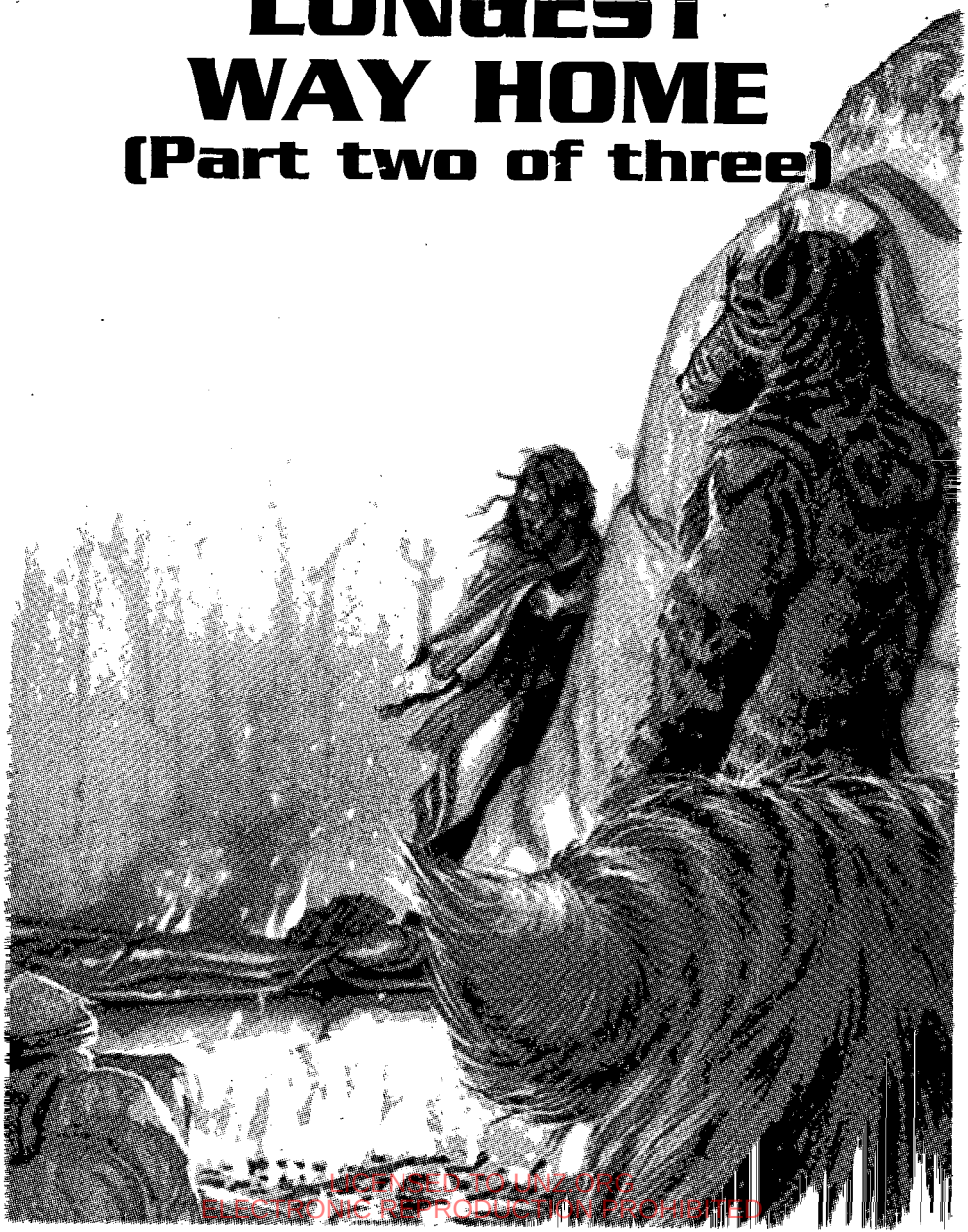
Our distinguished columnist returns to our pages with part two of his powerful new novel.



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE LONGEST WAY HOME

(Part two of three)



LICENSED TO MIZUNO.
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED.

SYNOPSIS OF PART ONE

The planet called Homeworld has been colonized twice by humans, in two waves spaced several centuries apart. The first to arrive was a group of farmers and herders who established a simple agricultural economy. When these first settlers experienced economic difficulties they invited a more aggressive and technically advanced group of Earthmen to settle among them and advise them. By now, more than a thousand years later, the second group of settlers have made themselves the dominant caste of Homeworld, an elite group who call themselves Masters. The two continents of the planet have been divided into large private estates under Master rule, the Great Houses, that are virtual city-states. The earlier group of settlers, known now as the Folk, live as serfs on the estates of the Masters, though some have remained outside the system in independent villages of their own.

Homeworld also has a number of more-or-less intelligent native races—the Indigenes, the noctambulos, and others—which lived in general harmony with each other before the arrival of the human colonists. The populations of each group had always been quite small, and when the humans came the native species simply moved aside and made room for them.

It is the custom of the Masters to send the heirs to each Great House to live with kinsmen in remote parts of the planet for a period during adolescence, to prepare them for the responsibilities of government that await them. Thus it is that fifteen-year-old Joseph Master Keilloran, the oldest son of one of the most powerful Masters of the southern continent, Helikis, finds himself many thousands of miles from home, living on the estate of his distant northern cousins the Getfens, when a violent uprising of the Folk breaks out and leaves him cut off from all contact with his family and having no way to return to them.

The uprising is wholly unexpected. The Folk have always been passive, placid people. But in a single night Getfen House is destroyed, the Getfens and many of their loyal followers are massacred, and Joseph himself barely manages to escape into the forests south of the estate. His only hope is to make his way—alone and on foot—toward some part of this northern continent of Manza where the rule of the Masters still prevails. Though he is capable and intelligent, he has always lived a life of high privilege and comfort, and he has had little preparation for the hardships that face him now.

He wanders through the forest, searching for a supposed village of the humanoid natives known as Indigenes where he hopes to find aid in reaching Ludbrek House, the next Great House to the south. In the course of his flight he encounters one of the giant, simple-minded creatures called noctambulos, who helps him forage for food and conveys him eventually to the Indigene village. Along the way Joseph stumbles over a hidden obstacle and badly injures his left leg. But he does manage to reach the village, finally, and the Indigenes, who have the most advanced culture of any of Homeworld's native races, offer him shelter and care for him while he recovers from his injury. When they discover that he has some rudimentary medical knowledge, derived from watching his father treating the peasants of House Keilloran, they ask him to examine several sick members of the tribe and cure their ills. Joseph, though he is uneasy about pretending to have skills that he does not in fact possess, does what he can for these people, and—somewhat to his surprise—achieves some cures.

Once Joseph's leg has begun to heal, the grateful Indigenes provide transportation for him to Ludbrek House—but he discovers that that House too

LICENSED TO NAZ GEE
FREE READ FOR PUBLIC DOMAIN PROHIBITED

man named Waerna, roaming about in the rubble, tells him that the Folk everywhere have risen up against the Great Houses and are killing any Masters they find. Joseph sees now that he will be entirely on his own as he tries to make his way homeward.

His leg is not yet strong enough for him to attempt such a journey. He has no choice but to return to the Indigene village, where he continues to function as a doctor, and engages in enlightening conversations with the Ardardin, as the village chief is called. Joseph knows a little of Indigene philosophical thought from what his tutor has told him, but now the Indigene explains in much greater detail why it is that his people have so readily accepted the seizure of their world by the human intruders. The reason is that the Indigenes have little regard for the reality of this world and all that is in it. All that truly matters is the world above, the world of the gods. This world is little more than illusion, and the humans who have conquered it are mere transient phenomena.

Once Joseph recovers and begins thinking of setting out to the south, he is offered a quid pro quo: the Indigenes will convey him by wagon to the next village in the chain of Indigene villages that stretches the length of Manza, and that village will take him on to the next, provided he will minister to the medical needs of each village as he goes. Joseph agrees, and after a stay of many weeks he leaves the village of the Ardardin, not without some regret, for he had come to regard the Indigene chief as a friend.

The parting is a strangely brief and chilly one, though. The Ardardin offers him no word of thanks for his medical services, no wish for a safe journey onward, no acknowledgment of the friendship that Joseph believed had sprung up between them. The village chief simply looks on as Joseph boards the wagon, and turns in silence. Joseph is surprised and a little hurt.

But they are not like us, he thinks, as the wagon moves on down the road. To them we are mere transient phenomena.

Once more he rode in a wagon drawn by a team of dull-eyed yaramirs, and once more Ulvas traveled with him, along with two other Indigenes whose names were Casqui and Paca. Joseph had no idea of the route he would be traveling now. There did not seem to be any word in Indigene for "map," and the Ardardin had not offered him much verbal information about the location of the next Indigene village.

The first part of the journey took him along the same slow, winding road, cobblestoned and narrow, that they had used in the trip to Ludbrek House. An old Indigene road, no doubt. Very old. Five thousand years? Ten thousand, even? It was suitable only for clumsy creaking wagons like this. In all the centuries and tens of centuries since this road had been built, probably nothing in it had been changed but for the replacement of a loose cobble every once in a while. It was just a quiet country road; the Indigenes had never seen any reason to transform it into a major highway.

It occurred to him that for the Indigenes time must seem to stand virtually still. They looked at everything under the auspices of eternity, the invisible sky, the hidden gods. Their gods were not much interested in change, and therefore neither were they. They made even a sleepy people like the Folk seem ferociously energetic. And the Folk themselves, he thought grimly, were not behaving all that sleepily these days.

As on his previous journey, a cool southern wind was blowing, stronger than it had been before and moist now, an unmistakable token of the coming rainy season that was still somewhere to the south of them but already

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sending its harbingers north. It never seemed to let up. Joseph turned sideways in the wagon to avoid its unending direct thrust.

The second day of plodding travel found them still moving along the road that led toward Ludbrek House. Joseph hoped they were not going to take him back there. He had no desire to see that sad ravaged place again. But that afternoon a second road appeared to their left, a road just as humble as the one they had been on, and the wagondriver Casqui swung the vehicle onto it with a couple of sharp syllables to the yaramirs.

Though their direction was easterly now rather than southerly, the countryside had not changed much. It was the same flat farmland as before, broken only by gently rolling meadows and, farther away, the purple humps of modest hills.

In late afternoon a big modern highway came into sight in the distance. It ran from north to south and thus lay squarely athwart their route. "Get under the furs," Ulvas told him. "Sometimes now they check the wagons that go by."

"Who does?" Joseph asked. "Masters, or Folk?"

Ulvas made the crossed-arms gesture, the Indigene shrug. "Whoever might be checking things that day. It does not matter, does it?"

The Indigene road, Joseph saw, ran right up to the great highway that the Masters had designed and the Folk had constructed. It halted at the edge of the highway and, he assumed, resumed on the other side. The broad smooth road was like a wall cutting across the land, marking a place where the native culture of this world and the culture of the Masters met. What had the Indigenes thought when these highways began sprouting on their land? Nothing at all, replied Joseph to his own question. Nothing at all. The highways meant nothing to them; the Masters meant nothing to them; this world itself meant nothing to them. This world was only a film lying over the invisible world that was true reality.

Trucks, big trucks newly repainted in drab military-looking colors, were moving at a brisk pace in both directions on the highway. Rebel trucks, most likely. There were not enough Masters in this whole continent to staff a real army. The much more numerous Folk seemed to have conjured one up and equipped it with all the industrial and commercial vehicles in Manza, though. Just as he had on his first day in the Getfen forest, Joseph trembled at the thought that the rebels—the Folk, the supposedly obtuse and doltish Folk—had been able very quietly to plan this formidable insurrection and put it into operation while the vastly superior intellects of the dominant Masters had somehow failed to detect that anything unusual was going on. And he wondered for what grim purpose it was that this roaring convoy of trucks was heading across the land.

An overpass spanned the highway here to handle cross-traffic like this Indigene wagon. Joseph nestled down beneath the thick stack of sour-smelling furs in the back of the wagon, and Ulvas tucked them around him to hide him from view. He would not have thought a pile of furs could have so much weight. They pressed down hard against him, and the one nearest to his face was jammed against his mouth and nostrils so closely that he gagged at the stale leathery odor of its underside. Getting sufficient air to breathe was no simple trick, either. He wondered how long the highway crossing would take. Another minute or two and he would have no choice but to stick his head out for a gulp of air, and it would be unfortunate to find himself staring at a rebel crossing-guard when he did.

But the wagon quickly descended the sloping overpass, and on the far

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

side, once it was toiling away on the cobblestones of the Indigene road again, Ulvas pulled the furs from him. None too soon it was, either. Joseph was just about at the point of nausea.

"How much longer to the village?" he asked.

"Soon. Soon."

That could mean anything: an hour, a day, a month. Twilight was coming on. He saw lights in the distance, and hoped they were the lights of the village; but then, in another few moments, he was dismayed to realize that what he was seeing were the lights of more trucks moving along yet another highway.

How could they have come to another highway so soon, though? This one was just as big as the last, and, like the last one, ran at right angles to their own route. In this thinly populated countryside there was no reason to build two such highways running on parallel courses such a short distance apart.

Nor had any such thing been done, Joseph realized moments later. The markings told him that this was the same highway as before, that the Indigene road must have gone wandering around this way and that and now was crossing the highway for a second time, in some other place. He could see from the deepening darkness to his right that they had returned to a southerly route. Once again Ulvas hastened to pull the stack of hides over him.

But this time there was a checkpoint of some sort at the approach to the overpass. The wagon came to a halt; Joseph heard muffled voices somewhere above him, discussing something in a language that sounded like a mixture of Folkish and Indigene, though through the pile of furs he could not make out more than an occasional individual word; and then came the unmistakable sound of booted feet very close by. They were inspecting the wagon, it seemed. Yes. Yes.

Why, he wondered, would anyone, rebel or Master, feel the need to search an Indigene wagon? Certainly anyone who had much knowledge of Indigenes would have little reason to think that the aloof, indifferent Indigenes would get so involved in human affairs as to be transporting anything that might be of interest to one set of combatants or the other.

Joseph lay absolutely motionless. He debated trying to hold his breath to keep from giving his presence away, and decided that that was a bad idea, that it would lead inevitably to the need to suck air into his lungs, which might reveal his presence under here, or else to make him cough, which certainly would. It seemed wiser to take very small, shallow breaths, just enough to keep himself supplied with oxygen. The horrible reek of the furs was another problem: he fought against the nausea, gagging. He bit down hard on his lip and tried not to notice the smell.

Someone was thumping around out there, poking this, checking that.

What if they pulled the hides off and found him lying there? How long would it take for them to identify him as a fugitive Master, and what was likely to happen to a Master, even one from the other continent, who fell into rebel hands?

But the thumping stopped. The voices faded. The wagon began to roll once more. What seemed like ten years went by before Ulvas pulled the furs off him again. Night had fallen. Stars were glistening everywhere. Two moons were in the sky, the little ones, Mebriel and Keviel. He heard the sounds of the busy highway, growing faint now, somewhere behind him.

"What happened?" Joseph asked. "What did they want? Were they looking for refugees?"

"They were looking for wine," Ulvas told him. "They thought we might be

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

carrying that as our cargo and they wanted some. The nights are becoming long this time of year and the soldiers at the checkpoints become bored."

"Wine," Joseph said. "Wine!" A flood of relief came over him and he broke into laughter.

The wagon continued onward until the highway sounds could no longer be heard. Then they halted and camped for the night, and one of the wagondrivers prepared a meal for them. Afterward Joseph tried to sleep, but he was too keyed up to manage it, and eventually he abandoned the attempt.

For hours he lay staring upward, studying the stars. It was a clear night, the constellations sharply delineated. He picked out the Hammer, the Whirlwind, the Mountain, the Axe. There was the Goddess plainly visible, her long flowing hair, her breasts, her broad dazzling hips, the bright triangle of stars that marked her loins. Joseph remembered the night his father first had showed her to him, the naked woman in the sky. It is something a man likes to show his son when his son reaches a certain age, his father had said. Joseph had been twelve, then. He had seen real naked women since then, once in a while, not often and usually not at very close range. They always were fascinating sights, although for him they could not begin to equal the voluptuousness of the starry goddess overhead, whose magnificent overflowing body spanned so many parsecs of the sky.

He wondered whether he would ever hold a woman in his arms, whether he would ever do with her the things that men did with women.

Certainly the opportunity for that had been there for him already if he had wanted it. None of the Folkish girls of the House would have dared refuse a young Master. But Joseph had not wanted to do it with a girl of the Folk. It would be too easy. There seemed something wrong about it, something cheap and brutal and cruel. Besides, it was said that all the Folkish girls began to make love when they were eleven or twelve, and thus he would be matching his innocence against some girl's vast experience, which might lead to embarrassment for him and perhaps even for her. As for girls of his own kind, no doubt there had been plenty of those around the estate too who would have been willing, certain flirtatious friends of his sister's, or Anceph's pretty daughter, or the long-legged red-haired one, Balbus's niece. And at Getfen House he knew he had entertained fantasies of embracing Kesti, although he knew the dangers that could come from an attempt by the son of the Master of one Great House to enter into a casual affair with the daughter of the Master of another.

He did not want a casual affair, anyway. He was not sure what he did want. Some sort of fastidiousness within him had held him back from doing anything with any girl. There would always be plenty of time for that, he had thought. Now he could no longer be sure of any such thing. He might have died this very night, if the rebel officer searching the wagon for Indigene wine had found a hidden Master instead.

He lay looking straight up at the Goddess, and imagined himself reaching into the sky and putting his hands over her breasts. The thought brought a smile to his lips. And then the third moon moved into view, big ruddy Sanivark, and the Goddess could no longer be seen. Joseph dozed then, and soon morning came, and they made a quick breakfast of dried meat and berries and moved along.

The landscape began to change. There were no longer any farms here, just broad fields of scrubby second-growth trees, and plateaus thick with rank sedge and clumps of briar. The soil looked bad, dry and pebbly, cut

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

again and again by deep ravines that displayed white and red striations, layers of sand, layers of clay.

Then the land began to improve again and on the third day they came at last to the Indigene village that was their destination. It was laid out much like the village where Joseph had been living before, tall conical buildings made from mud that had been thickly but irregularly plastered over a framework of interlaced laths and twigs, all of them set cheek by jowl in tight curving rows surrounding a central plaza that contained ceremonial buildings, with an agricultural zone forming a ring around the entire settlement. The layout was so similar to that of the previous village that Joseph half expected the Ardardin to come out and greet him here. But in place of a single chieftain this village seemed to have a triumvirate of rulers: at least, three dignified-looking older Indigenes, each of them clad in the same sort of painted leather cape and seashell-decorated leather skirt that the Ardardin had worn, presented themselves as Joseph was getting down from the wagon, and stood in aloof, somber silence, watching his arrival in a kind of bleak attentiveness, saying not a word.

The other villagers were considerably more demonstrative. Dozens of them, children and adults both, came running forward to swarm around Joseph. There was an endearing innocence to this unexpected enthusiasm. They pressed up close against him, narrow tubular heads butting at him like hammers, boldly bringing their faces within inches of his own, nose to nose. Their throat-pouches fluttered and swelled in flurries of spasmodic agitation. A few of the most courageous hesitantly put their hands for a moment or two to the dangling strips of his ragged clothing and lightly pulled at them, as though they found them amusing. As they encircled him they murmured excitedly to one another, but what they said was too indistinctly enunciated and too thickly colloquial for Joseph to be able to comprehend more than the occasional word.

One of them, carrying a little bag of woven cloth that contained a glossy black powder, solemnly poured some into the palm of its hand, dipped the tips of two long pliant fingers into it, and slowly and carefully rubbed a circle of the stuff onto each of Joseph's cheeks. Joseph tolerated this patiently. He noticed now that the faces of most of the others were similarly adorned with patterns done in the black pigment, not just circles but in some cases whorls, triangles, crosses.

Ulvas, meanwhile, had entered into a conversation with a villager of substantial size and presence who, from the looks of things, was an important minister in the government of the triumvirs, though it was not clad in any of the symbols of authority itself. Joseph could not hear what they were saying, but it began gradually to become clear to him that what was taking place was not so much a conversation as a negotiation; Ulvas was the seller, the big villager was the prospective purchaser, and the primary topic of the conversation was the price that would have to be paid.

As for the commodity being sold, that, Joseph swiftly realized, was himself.

He was not meant to be a party to the transaction. The entire interchange was being carried on in low tones and quickly exchanged phrases, most of them words that were unfamiliar to him and all of it so rapid and cryptic that Joseph had no hope of following it. A good deal of the process was purely gestural. After each set of offers and replies the villager would go across to the triumvirate and report the details. This led to further palaver among the four of them, after which a signal would be given by one of the ruling

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

three, and humbler citizens of the village came forth bearing merchandise: furs, beaded necklaces, bowls containing dried seeds and berries. Ulvas appeared to dismiss each offer as insufficient. New negotiations ensued, leading to new discussions between the rulers and their minister, and even more goods would be brought out: molded balls of vegetable meal, a brown bundle of dried meat, the blanched skull of some horned beast of the forest.

Ulvas was holding out for a steep price, it seemed. At one point there appeared to be a total breakdown of the dealings, huffy turning of backs, foreheads touched with splayed fingers in the emphatic gesture that meant negation. But perhaps all that was a signal of a climax in the negotiations, not a collapse; for almost immediately afterward came apparently conciliatory postures, signs of agreement, a series of new gestures clearly indicating that a deal had been struck. That seemed to be the case. Ulvas, Casqui, and Paca began loading the wagon with the things that stood stacked all about in the center of the plaza.

The big minister signaled to Joseph in an unmistakable way. He belonged to them, now.

And now he knew just how little altruism, if indeed there had been any at all, there was in the Ardardin's decision to pass him along to this neighboring village. The Ardardin had correctly seen that Joseph would be leaving its village as soon as he could; there was need of Joseph's medical services at other Indigene villages along the route south; no doubt it had seemed merely efficient, rather than in any way morally virtuous, to provide a wagon to take Joseph on his way and simultaneously to turn a nice profit by selling him to the next village in the chain instead of just bestowing him upon them.

Ulvas and Casqui and Paca departed without a word to him. But Joseph had learned not to expect sentimental leavetakings from these people.

His new hosts—his *owners,* Joseph corrected himself—showed him to his dwelling-place, a room much smaller than the one he had had before, and even more musty and dimly lit, with only a couple of tatty-looking fur rugs for his bed. On the other hand they had set out a generous meal for him, two bowls of their milky wine, an assortment of berries, stewed meats, and cooked grain, and a tray of knobby greenish-purple fruits of a kind he had never seen before. They were sour and tangy, not unpleasant, although after eating a couple he observed that the thick red juice of them had left his tongue puckered and the entire interior of his mouth very dry. He let the rest of them go untouched.

This settlement, too, had a backlog of medical tasks awaiting his attention in an infirmary set a little way apart from the village core. There were the usual sprained limbs and minor infections, which Joseph dealt with in the ways that had by now become familiar to him. One case, though, was more complicated. There had been a hunting accident, it seemed—the only other explanation, which he found too implausible to consider, was that one Indigene had actually attacked another—and the patient, a young male, had a small projectile point embedded in the upper right side of his back. Apparently this had happened some time ago, for the wound, though infected, had partly healed. No attempt had been made to extract the point. Joseph wondered how deep it was. The patient was in obvious distress: weak, feverish, barely coherent when Joseph questioned him. Joseph held his hand lightly over the wound and felt an insistent pounding throb beneath, as of something in there that must be let out.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Very well, he thought. I will operate.

Joseph had come to accept his own medical masquerade so thoroughly that he felt no compunction about taking this project on. The man lying before him must already be in great discomfort, which would only increase if nothing were done, and finally the infection would spread to some vital zone and cost him his life. Joseph asked for and received the assistance of the village's master of herbal remedies, who at Joseph's direction administered a steep dose of the pain-deadening drug to Joseph's patient. He laid out his pitiful little collection of medical instruments, and cleansed the wound with a piece of cloth dipped in wine, which he hoped would have some antiseptic properties, and gently parted the healed section of the opening so that he could insert the tip of his knifeblade as a probe.

The patient did not seem to complain as Joseph ventured into the golden interior tissues. He wondered how deeply he dared to go; but the essential thing was to seem confident and composed, and that was surprisingly easy for him to achieve. Perhaps in these weeks among the Indigenes he had begun to acquire some form of their overriding indifference to the trivial realities of the visible world. Under the pressure of his blade blood had begun freely to flow, scarlet blood with emerald highlights. The blood is only an illusion, Joseph told himself. The knife I use is an illusion also. Whatever pain the patient may be feeling is illusory. The weaponpoint that I'm seeking is another illusion.

His hand was steady. His conscience remained clear.

He touched something hard within. Was it the point, or was it a bone? He wiggled the knifeblade and thought he felt motion against its tip. A bone would not move, he thought. It must be the weapon-point. Coolly he widened the opening. A hint of something dark inside there, was it? He washed away the blood and took a close look. The point, yes. Deep in the meat of the Indigene's back.

Now came the hard part, for him, for his patient. He beckoned to two of the Indigene onlookers.

"Hold him down," Joseph said, using the grammatical mode of a direct command, not a supplication. He was the most important person in this room, right now. He did not need to beg for the assistance that was required. "You, put your hand here, and you, hold him over here. Don't let him move."

There was no kindly way to do this. He inserted the blade, listened for the little scraping sound as it made contact with the hidden point within, made a twisting motion with his wrist, brought the tip of the blade upward, involuntarily biting his lip as he did so. A great shudder went through the Indigene, who lay face down on the pile of rugs before him. The two villagers who were holding him did not waver.

"There it is," Joseph said, as the head of the point came into view.

He eased it farther upward, bringing it out of the Indigene's flesh with one smooth motion, and caught it for a moment in his hand, showing it around exultantly to his audience. Then he tossed it aside. Blood was flowing more heavily now than before. Covering the wound with his hand, he watched quizzically as it welled up between his fingers. He stanched, laved, stanched again. The flow began to slacken. Was it safe to close the incision at this point? He held the sides of the wound together, contemplated them, nodded thoughtfully, just as someone who really knew what he was doing might do.

"Hand that to me," Joseph said, indicating the little machine from his utility case that served to stitch wounds. He was still not entirely certain

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

how to operate it, but he had enough of a rough idea to make the attempt worthwhile.

Three stitches seemed to do the job.

He prescribed rest for the patient, and the pain-killing drug, and then, an inspired thought, some wine also. The Indigenes were passing the extracted weapon-point from hand to hand around the room. They were staring at him with what certainly must be looks of awe. Joseph wondered, as he had before, whether this time he might not have played the role too well; he wanted these people to move him along to the next village along his route south, after all, not lay claim to him as a permanent village treasure. But once again he had misjudged the way their minds worked. They kept him only until he had had the opportunity to examine every sick person in the village; and then, two or three weeks later, when he had set things to rights as much as possible, they let him know that the time had come for him to be sent onward.

He was not going to miss this place. Joseph had made a point of introducing himself by name to the chief minister and the herbalist and several others, but they had absorbed the information with no evident show of interest, and during his entire stay in the village no one had ever called him by name. He had no relationship there similar to the one he had had with the Ardardin, or even with Ulvas. It was strangely depersonalizing. He felt as though he had no existence for these people other than as a pair of skilled hands. But he saw a reason for that: he had come to the first village as a refugee, and they had taken him in the way they would take in a guest. But here he had been purchased. He was considered mere property. At best a slave, perhaps.

The route to the next village took Joseph through a district of abandoned farms. There were no indications of any Great House in the vicinity; this seemed to be one of the regions, common also in Helikis, where the Masters were absentee landlords and the farms were operated in their name by bailiffs who were themselves of Folkish blood. But the Folk who farmed here must have been loyalists, for the destruction that had been worked was complete, the rebels striking against their own kind with the vindictiveness and vehemence that elsewhere they had reserved for the Masters. Joseph saw the same sort of ruination he had looked upon at Ludbrek House, a sorry wasteland of burned houses, wrecked carts, dead animals, drowned fields. Seven such farms lay along one fifteen-mile stretch of road, all of them shattered in the same fashion. There was no sign of life anywhere.

It rained for the first time that season on the day they passed the last of the dead farms. The three Indigenes who were transporting him took no notice whatever as it started. They said nothing, they made no attempt to cover themselves. But Joseph, riding unprotected in the back of the open wagon, was caught by surprise when the sky, which had been an iron gray for days, turned black and then silver and abruptly began pelting him with cold, hard, fierce rain. He was drenched almost before he knew what was happening. He managed to improvise a little shelter for himself out of some of the many fur mats that were lying about in the wagon and a few of the sticks that were there also, but it was a flimsy construction that did very little to keep the rain out, and he was soaked already anyway.

There was no letup in the rain all day, or on the one that followed. Joseph knew that rain in the eastern half of the northern continent was a highly seasonal thing, a dry season followed by a wet one, with the annual rains beginning in the south and working their way north to High Manza, but he had imagined the change from one to the other would be more gradual. This was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

like the tipping of a bucket over lands that had been parched for months, a vast bucket whose contents were infinite, inexhaustible. He had never felt so cold and wet in his life. He had not known that such discomfort was possible.

At first the rain disappeared into the ground as soon as it struck. But by the second day the land, which in these parts was coarse sandy gray stuff that had looked as if it had not felt rain for centuries, had been saturated by the downpour, was glutted by it, ceasing now to absorb it. Freshets and rivulets were beginning to make their way along the old dry watercourses that ran in multitudinous furrows across the sloping plains. Already little ponds were forming. Another few days of this, Joseph thought, and there would be lakes and rivers.

He wondered how the mud-and-wattle buildings that the Indigenes of this territory favored could stand up to such an onslaught. Rainfall like this ought to send them sluicing away. But they were hardly likely to build with such stuff if it came apart under the impact of the first rain, and indeed the village toward which they had been traveling, another one of conical towers crowded tightly together around a central plaza, was sloughing off the watery bombardment as easily as though its buildings were made of steel and concrete. They must add something to the mud to make it water-resistant, Joseph thought. The juice of one of their herbs, maybe. The entire science of these people appeared to be constructed out of a knowledge of the chemical properties of the plant life that grew about them. They had no physics, no astronomy, no technology, no real medicine other than the use of potions. But they could build houses out of twigs and mud that would stay intact in diabolical rainfall like this.

News of Joseph's healing powers had preceded him here. The villagers seemed prepared to pay a heavy bounty for him, for they had filled one entire room of a building on the plaza with treasures to offer: not just the usual fur mats and beaded necklaces, but great branches of blue coral from the eastern sea, and pouches of polished turquoise stones, and the vivid blue-and-red feathers of birds of some tropic land far away, and a great deal more. Even so, the negotiations went on for an extraordinarily long time, and they did not seem to be going smoothly. Though they were conducted, as before, mostly with gestures, aided by quick spurts of conversation in what seemed to be a commercial patois using words unknown to Joseph, he could tell by the tone of voice and the looks of unmistakable exasperation that no meeting of minds was occurring. Huddling soaked and miserable while his soon-to-be former owners, Indigenes whose names he had never learned, bargained with these new Indigenes who sought possession of him over the price of his services, Joseph thought at one point that his current masters had found even this enormous pile of goods inadequate. It looked very much as though they were going to break off the discussion and set out for some village other than this before he had even had a chance to get dry.

Well, if they did, so be it, as long as the village that they would be taking him to was one that brought him closer to his home. But what if—it was his old, constant fear—they simply hauled him back to their own town and kept him as a permanent fixture there?

That did not happen. As abruptly as the dry season had given way to the rain, the contending hagglers reached an agreement and Joseph's transfer was consummated. Staggering under mats and necklaces and coral branches and all the rest, his sellers went off in the rain to their wagon and his buyers crowded round him for what was becoming the familiar tribal welcome.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

These people wanted Joseph not only to heal their sick but to bring holy blessings to the food supplies that they had stored away during the harvest season. In a kind of weird pantomime they led him to their granaries and acted out a description of what it was they wanted him to do, until at last he said impatiently, "You can say it in words. I do understand your language, you know."

But that seemed to bewilder them. They continued to point and nod and jerk their heads at him.

"Can't you understand what I'm saying?" he asked.

Maybe they spoke some dialect here so different from the Indigene he had learned in Keilloran that they regarded him as speaking some foreign language. But he saw he was wrong: he heard them talking among themselves, and the words they were using were, in general, understandable enough. Finally he did succeed in getting them to address him directly. It was as though they did not *want* to speak with him. His using their language made them uncomfortable. This village must not have had much contact with Masters, or with Folk either, for that matter, and looked upon him as some sort of alien thing, which had come their way as a kind of gift of the gods but which was not to be regarded in any way as fit to hold converse with. It was another step in his depersonalization, Joseph thought. As he moved southward he was getting farther and farther from the sort of existence he had had in the village of the Ardardin. Back there he had not had any such sense of solitude, of lostness, of *thing*ness, as he was beginning to feel down here.

But it was important to bear in mind that he was getting closer to home all the time, though he knew that Keilloran and its House were still a tremendous distance away.

He had no objection to blessing their food supply, if that was what they wanted him to do. Joseph had long since ceased to care what sort of hocus-pocus he performed for the sake of earning his passage to the Southland. Just as at the beginning, in that time only a few months earlier when he was much more naïve than he had since become, he had felt it was some obscure violation of his honor as a Master to pretend to know anything about medicine, and that had very quickly ceased to be an issue for him, so too now, if the folk here wanted him to play the role of a demigod, or of a demon, or of anything else that might suit their needs, he was quite willing to do it. Whatever got him homeward: that was his new motto.

And so he let himself be taken into their storage-houses, to their bins of grain and berries and their hanging sides of drying meat and their casks of wine and all the rest that they had laid down for their use in the coming winter, and he threw back his shoulders and raised his head toward the heavens and held up his hands with his fingers outspread, and he cried out anything that came into his mind. "Cailin, Rickard, and Eitan, bless this food! In the name of Kesti and Wykkin and Dorian, may virtue enter this food! I call upon Balbus! I call upon Anceph! I call upon Rollin!" He called upon the great ones of Old Earth, too, Agamemnon and Caesar and Genghis Khan, Napoleon and Gilgamesh. What harm did it do? These bins of grain would be none the worse for it. And this village had paid a high price for him: he must try to make them feel they had had their money's worth.

I am becoming a terrible hypocrite, Joseph thought.

And then he thought, No, I am simply growing up.

He examined that little interchange with himself often during the long rainy days ahead, as he twisted dislocated joints back into place and soothed

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sprains and stitched cut flesh together and made important-looking holy passes in the air over the prostrate forms of Indigenes who were suffering from ailments that he could not diagnose. *I am simply growing up.* Throughout much of his adolescence he had wondered what it would be like to be grown up. He knew that he would change, of course. But how? What would he learn? What would he forget? How much of his present self would he remember, when he was a man like his father, carrying the responsibilities that men like his father carried? Would he become hard and cruel, like so many of the adults he had observed? Do foolish things? Make needless enemies?

Well, now he was growing up very fast, and growing up seemed to involve putting aside all the lofty Master ideals that his father had taught him by example and Balbus by direct precept, and simply doing whatever he had to do, day by day, in order to survive. Otherwise, he was not going to get to grow up at all. However much future he was going to have would depend to a great extent on how resourceful he showed himself to be on this strange, unexpected journey across unknown Manza.

It rained virtually every day, the whole time he was in this village. By the time they decided they had earned back the price they had paid for him and were ready to sell him to the next tribe down the road, rivers were leaping their banks and meadows had turned to marshes. But the rain did hold off on the day of his next transfer, though. Once again he rode in an open cart down a cobbled Indigene road.

The gray sky gave him little clue to the position of the sun, but he seemed to be going south: at least, he hoped so. Joseph had long ago lost track of how much time had passed since the wild night of his escape from Getfen House, nor did he have any notion of the distance he had covered in this series of jolting cart-rides from village to village. He hoped that he was out of High Manza by now and somewhere down in the central part of the continent, but the Indigenes neither would nor could give him any help in determining that, and the reference books he had with him afforded no useful information, other than to tell him that the central part of the continent was mountainous.

That was good news, because he did seem to be coming into higher country. He saw bare serrated hills off to the west, and what seemed like higher peaks behind them. The air was colder, too. Each day was a little chillier than the one preceding. Joseph had never experienced really cold weather before. In his region of the Southland a kind of eternal mild springtime prevailed, all the year round. He had managed to obtain new linen robes from one of the Indigene villages to replace the shredded and tattered clothes he had been wearing since the start of his journey, but Indigenes did not appear to be very sensitive to changes in temperature and the fabric was light stuff, ill suited to a winter journey. Speaking in the grammar of a supplicant, he was able to get them to give him more, but, even wearing double and triple thicknesses, he found himself shivering most of the time.

He had grown very thin, also. He had always been active and athletic, and his build was naturally long-limbed and slender, but the privations of his trip and a diet made up mostly of meat and fruit had melted from him what little fat there was, and he was beginning to worry about the loss of muscle and bone. When he pinched his skin he felt nothing between his fingers but the skin itself. The various villages did not begrudge him food, but it did not appear to put any flesh on him. He had no access to mirrors here, but he could feel what was happening to his face, the cheeks becoming gaunt and drawn, the bones standing out sharply. He was gaunt all over, mere skin

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and bones. He knew he must look like a wild man. Though he attempted periodically to trim his hair, since Masters did not wear their hair long, he knew it must by now be an uncouth shaggy mane. His beard, which he also tried ineffectually to trim, had turned coarse and thick, a black pelt that covered most of his face to a point high up on his cheeks. No one would recognize him, he knew, if he were to be miraculously transported back to Keilloran House right now. They would run from him in fright, screaming.

The odd and disturbing thing was that as he grew thinner, his appetite, which had always been so voracious, seemed to be diminishing. He rarely felt hungry any more. Whatever they gave him to eat seemed to suffice. He had to force himself to swallow more than he really wanted, and sometimes, against all logic, he did not succeed. He had become light, very light, so light that he felt it would be no great task to kick himself free of the ground and go floating up into the sky, drifting like an untethered balloon above the clouds. That was an interesting fantasy, but it was also a bad sign that such thoughts were entering his mind. They were a sign of hallucinatory delusion, perhaps. He needed to keep his strength up, to build himself back toward whatever might be the minimum level he would need to carry him across the thousands of miles that stood between him and home.

Two more trades and he was in the foothills of what unquestionably must be the mountains of the region known as Middle Manza. It was still the rainy season, and there was a coating of snow on the distant peaks. The air was not only cooler but thinner here, so that his heart worked harder with every step he took and quickly began to pound, and he often had to pause to catch his breath as he moved about in a village. There were dizzy spells, too. One time Joseph thought he was going to faint. How much of his present weakness and lack of appetite was the result of the altitude and how much from loss of weight, he could not say.

When I come down out of these mountains, he promised himself, I will try to eat more and regain my strength. Whatever it is they give me to eat, I will eat all of it, and then I will ask them to let me have some more.

The world of Masters and Folk seemed very far away in these hilly parts. The kinds of farming that were practiced in the lowlands were difficult if not impossible in this harsh rocky terrain, and though occasional settlements had been attempted, it looked as though most of the region had been left untouched. There were no modern highways here, no dams, no cities, no Great Houses. Sometimes Joseph would catch sight of curling white plumes of smoke far away, rising from what he suspected were the chimneys of a Folkish village along the edge of some high slope. He had heard that in remote rural districts like these there had always been places where the Folk still lived apart from the modern world, lived as they had before the Conquest, simple farmers and hunters unaffected by the presence of Masters. They might occasionally have contact with outsiders but had never become part of the world's economic system. Joseph never was brought close enough to any of those smoke-plumes to determine whether his guess was correct, though. For the most part the foothill zone, where it was inhabited at all, was inhabited by Indigenes, dwelling as always in little widely separated villages.

He was shifted from one village to another every few weeks. Each shift brought him into higher territory: the air was no longer cool but cold, almost painfully so, and white cloaks of snow now could be seen not just on far-off peaks but along the summits of the hills overlooking the villages themselves. There seemed to be relatively less work for him to do here than in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the lowlands, as if, perhaps, these mountain Indigenes were a hardier breed than their cousins below. The price that was being paid for him diminished as he was shuffled along through the mountains: a few handfuls of beads and some mangy mats were enough now to buy him. But his buyers did still seem to understand that he was a human being in transit, that they were supposed to keep him for only a little while and then pass him along to the next tribe to the south.

They rarely spoke to him, in these villages. The farther Joseph got from the Indigenes of the north, who had lived in the territory between House Getfen and House Ludbrek and were at least accustomed to having glancing contact with Masters, the less responsive the villagers became to him in general. It was inescapably clear that he was simply a commodity to them, an itinerant medicine-man, something to be traded from village to village according to the rhythms of the villagers' own needs. They did not perceive themselves as having any direct transaction with him. He barely seemed even to exist for them. Somehow he had lost human status in their eyes, whatever human status might actually mean to them. It had actually been interesting to live among the northern Indigenes, not just a fugitive but also an observer studying the folkways of this intelligent and appealing race, but that was over, now. He had passed into some new realm of being in which he was practically inanimate, a thing to be bought and sold like a stack of furs. It made for a stark, frighteningly lonely existence. More than once Joseph awoke to find himself in tears.

Most of their communication with him, always minimal at best, was carried out by means of gestures. More and more they gave him the impression that they did not expect him to understand their language, and even when he showed them that he did, that impression did not appear to be dispelled. His words barely registered on them, and they would go right back to using gestures the next time. But otherwise most of them treated him reasonably well, giving him plenty of food and decent lodgings. In one village, when they saw how badly he was taking the chill of the mountain air, they provided him with a mantle of dark furs to wrap around himself, and let him keep it when they sold him onward to the adjacent tribe a little while afterward.

The trouble was that he did not think he was moving southward any longer. The weather was still so rainy, or sometimes snowy, that Joseph rarely got a clear enough view of the sky to work out much sense of the direction he was traveling in. But it seemed to him now that they had begun to sell him sidewise, shuttling him back and forth over the crest of these hills according to the lie of their own villages rather than in accordance with any need of his own, and his calculations appeared to show that there was never much change in latitude.

"I am going south," he told them, when his time was up at the next village. "I am returning to my family in the southern continent." But where he happened to want to go was no concern of theirs. "Do you understand me?" he said. "I must go south." They crossed their arms at him. They understood what he was saying, perhaps; but they did not care. This was the other side of that placid Indigene indifference. They felt no resentment over the conquest of their entire world by humans, perhaps, but they owed no obeisance, either. The next day, when they set out with him to take him to his newest home, the route that the wagon followed led unmistakably east.

Not to be going forward was the same thing as to be sliding backward. So Joseph knew that this phase of his journey, the phase in which he had tried

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to make his way back to his home across Manza as the chattel of helpful Indigenes, was coming to an end. They had ceased to be helpfu, now. He would never reach Helikis if they went on shipping him around the central highlands forever in this lateral way. He saw that he was going to have to break away from them and proceed on his own.

But he hesitated to take the step. The notion of setting out through these mountains alone, in winter, with cold rain falling every day and now and then snow, was a troublesome one. What would he eat? Where would he sleep? How would he keep from freezing to death?

And also he wondered whether it might anger the last villagers in the sequence if he were to slip away from them before they had had a chance to strike a deal for him, thus cheating them of the opportunity to turn a profit, or at the worst break even, on their temporary ownership of him. Would they go in pursuit of him? He had never heard of Indigenes becoming angry over anything. But these Indigenes of the mountains were very little like the ones he had known in Keilloran, or in the Manza lowlands. They might not take his disappearance lightly. It was entirely possible that he would become the first Master to be a fugitive not just from rebel Folk but from Indigenes as well.

I will wait a little longer, he told himself. Perhaps the winter will end soon, or they will start selling me southward again, or at least I will be sent the next time to some village in the foothills, so that when I escape I will be able to find my way down into the lowlands, where it is warmer and I will have some hope of foraging for food.

And indeed it began to seem as if they were moving him south again. There were two big leaps, one long ride that took him to a mountaintop village gripped by such terrible cold that not even snow would fall and the ground was locked in an iron rigidity and seemed to clang when you walked on it, and then another down the far slope to an easier place of leaping brooks and green gullies thick with ferns; and each of these places, the frost-bound one and the ferny one, appeared to be well south of its predecessor. Joseph took heart from that. Two more such leaps and he might be out of the mountains altogether.

But he had rejoiced too soon. When he left the Indigenes of the fern-gully village, it was by way of a winding route up and up into the ridge above their sheltered district and down the other side, and then, all day long on a day of clear crisp weather and a second day just like it following, along a straight road with the sun sitting in the southern sky behind them like a great mocking eye. Joseph waited for the road to swing about, but never once did it deviate from that northward bearing. When at last they handed him over to his newest purchasers, he noted that the village to which he had been brought lay in a sloping saddle facing west, with mist-shrouded lowlands in the valley below, and a lofty chain of peaks rising like a wall behind him to the east. So he had gained a little by getting closer to the western side of the high country, where he expected that the descent into the lowlands would be easier, but he had lost a great deal through backtracking northward, and who was to say where they would send him after this? The earlier sidewise shuttling had been bad enough; but now he was going in circles. Regardless of the risks, it was time for him to take matters into his own hands.

It was the evening of Joseph's third day in this latest village. There was very little medical work for him here: a case of what looked like frostbite, and an inflamed jaw, and an infected hand. In general he found the place cheerless and unwelcoming. It was a small village and its people seemed

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sullen and morose, although Joseph had seen often enough before the unwisdom of trying to interpret the postures and facial expressions of Indigenes according to what he understood of human postures and expressions. He reminded himself that these people were not human and it was wrong to think of them as though they were.

But it was hard to regard them as anything but unfriendly. They never said anything to him except out of necessity, as when informing him of things he had to know in order to find his way around the village. Nor did they did not seem ever to look directly at him; instead they turned their heads sideways and gave him oblique slitted glances. They did appear to have some curiosity about him, but not of the kind that would lead to any sort of real communication between him and them. Perhaps they had never seen a human before, in this remote, isolated place. He was nothing but a freakish anomaly to them, an intruder from a part of the world they wanted nothing to do with. Well, that made it all the easier for him to leave with a clear conscience.

He thought he would try the combinant one more time before setting out. Joseph had not so much as touched it for many weeks, but it had navigational functions as well as being a communications device, and he had some hope that it might work better at this altitude than it had in the lowlands. He activated it and it gave him the same odd pink glow and meaningless sputtering sounds that he had been getting from it since the village of the Ardardin. But as he started to put it back in his pack a long double-jointed hand reached out from behind him and gently but firmly took the device from him.

He had not heard them come in, but three Indigenes had entered his room. Joseph thought he recognized the one who had taken the combinant from him as the head man of the village, but he was not sure, since they were so uncommunicative here; village chieftains in this region wore no special regalia, and it was too soon after Joseph's arrival for him to have learned to tell one villager from another.

It was holding the combinant in the palm of its hand and was prodding its buttons carefully with two fingers of the other.

"That's a communications device," Joseph said. "But it hasn't been working right for a long time."

The Indigene continued to poke at the combinant's control panel. It was as though Joseph had not said anything at all. Apparently the Indigene was trying to replicate the pink glow that Joseph had drawn from it.

"Do you want me to show you how to do it?" Joseph asked, holding out his hand. He did not think it was wise to try to take the device from the Indigene by direct action.

But the Indigene had found the right button. The pink glow appeared, and the sputtering began. That seemed to interest it very much. It brought the combinant up within a couple of inches of its flat-featured face and studied it with what looked like keen fascination; then it turned and displayed the little machine to its two companions; and then it began to turn the thing over and over in its hand, as if searching for some way to make it do something else besides glow and sputter.

This is very atypical of you, Joseph thought. You people are not supposed to have any interest in our machines. Indeed you scorn them, is that not so? You regard them as the illusory products of an illusory race.

But either he had misunderstood some of the things the Ardardin had been telling him, or it was an error to imagine that all Indigenes had the same set of philosophical beliefs, or else this mountaineer simply thought

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the combinant was a particularly pleasing trinket. The three of them were passing it around, now, each taking a turn at pushing its buttons. Joseph felt uneasy about that. The combinant had not been working properly for a long while, either because it was itself broken or the entire worldwide communications system had been brought down, and in any case he doubted that these people could do any further harm to it. But he did not like to see the device in their hands. You were told not to make any artifacts of human technology available to Indigenes. That was the rule. It had been explained to him once: doing so might tend to dilute the purity of their culture, or some such thing. Although Joseph could not see how letting the inhabitants of this remote village play with a broken combinant could do any harm to the purity of Indigene culture, some vestige of his sense of himself as a Master recoiled from this violation of custom.

Besides, the combinant was *his*. He had little enough left of the life that once had been his in the days when he had been Joseph Master Keilloran. What if they found the device so interesting that they decided to keep it—looking upon it, say, as one additional benefit that they were getting in return for the trade-goods they had given the fern-gully people for Joseph?

And that was exactly what they seemed to intend. The three Indigenes turned and started to go from the room, taking the combinant with them.

"Wait a minute," Joseph said. "That instrument is mine. You may not have it."

They paused by the door and looked back at him. Their expressions, insofar as he could interpret them at all, appeared to register surprise that he had said something. They did not show any indication that they had understood what he said, although he was sure that they had.

He held out his hand. "Give it to me," he said, using the supplicatory mode. "I have need of it."

What an Indigene of the Ardardin's village would have replied, was, almost certainly, "I recognize your need," and then it would have handed the combinant over. But these people recognized nothing. Once more they turned to leave.

"No," Joseph said. "I must have it. Give it to me." Not using the supplicatory any more: this was a direct request. And, when he saw that they were paying no heed, he followed it with the same statement phrased in the rarely used mode reserved for outright commands, which in this context might well be construed as insulting. It made no difference. They did not care about his grammar; probably they were amazed that he could utter intelligible words at all. But his wishes, his pleas, his orders, were equally unimportant to them. They went from the room and his combinant went with him.

Let them have it, Joseph thought sullenly, when his first surge of anger and frustration had died away. It was broken anyway.

Although he knew it meant leaving the combinant behind, he was still resolved to make his escape. The dry weather of recent days was still holding. It was senseless to stay among the Indigenes any longer. Not a day, not an hour, not a moment. He would depart this very night.

With a sense of growing excitement, even jubilation, he made his preparations, stuffing his pack with as much dried meat and berries as it would hold, filling with fresh water the wine-flask from Getfen House that had served as his canteen during his days in the forest, rolling up the mantle of dark furs an earlier village had given him and tying it around his waist. He looked into the corridor. No one seemed to be on guard out there.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The night was clear and cold, though not as cold as some recent nights had been. The stars of the Manza sky, which once had looked very strange to him but by now were only too familiar, wheeled overhead. The only moon that was visible was fast-moving little Mebriel, hardly brighter than a star itself. A dull red glow in the east, behind the mountains, told Joseph that big Sanivark would probably be coming over the horizon soon, lighting everything up with its brick-red beams, but he hoped to have this place well to his rear before that happened.

A bonfire was burning in the village plaza. The sound of singing voices drifted through the air. The Indigenes seemed to gather there most nights after dark, heedless as ever of the cold. Joseph turned and headed in the other direction, down past the infirmary and the town midden. Earlier that day he had seen a path that went behind the midden and seemed to lead on downslope into the woods that lay west of town.

He passed a couple of shadowy figures as he went. They gave him quick glances, but no one stopped him, no one questioned him. He was not a prisoner here, after all. And the barrier of reserve that existed between these people and him protected him now. Still, he wished he had not been noticed. If his disappearance bothered them when they found him gone in the morning, this would give them a clue as to the direction he had taken.

The path was steeper than he had expected. The village's entire site sloped sharply to the west at something like a twenty-degree grade before the far side of the saddle-shaped valley in which the town was contained turned upward again, but the grade was irregular, flattening out in some places and dropping sharply in others. More than once Joseph found himself struggling down the side of what was essentially a huge ravine. The path quickly deteriorated, too, now that he was some distance from town, so that in the moonlit darkness he could barely find it among all the brambles and woody briars that were encroaching on it, and on two occasions he wandered from it altogether and had to grope his way back. At all times he picked his way carefully, mindful of his agonizing stumble in the Getfen forest. Haste could be disastrous. His twisted knee had long since healed by now, but he knew that another such injury, out here by himself in these frosty woods, would mean the end of him.

Creatures hooted in the night. There were rustlings and cracklings all around him. He ignored all that. He forced himself steadily onward, moving as fast as he dared, guiding himself by a big icy-looking star that lay dead ahead. The only thing that mattered right now was putting distance between himself and the Indigene village.

It was hard work. Though Joseph had grown accustomed to the altitude after so many weeks in the mountains, he felt the strain of it nevertheless: his heart boomed in his chest and his breath came short, and for long stretches he found himself panting, which dried out his mouth and tempted him to dip into his precious water supply. He fought the temptation back. In this mountain saddle the drainage patterns were all wrong for streams, and he could not say when or where he would find his next source of fresh water: on the other side of the slope, no doubt.

But then the path showed signs of beginning to turn upward, and the ascent became a continuous one, which told him that he had finally reached the far side of the saddle, the shallow western rise that separated the village from the lowlands beyond. With his goal so close, Joseph stepped up his pace, pushing himself to the limits of his strength. The warmth of his own exertions

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

protected him against the cold. He could feel streams of sweat running down the sides of his rib cage, not an unpleasant sensation, as he forced himself up the steep trail. There would be time to rest later. He prayed for an easy descent into the lowlands once he was over the summit of the western ridge.

By the time Joseph attained it, though, he could see that no such easy descent was going to be granted him. Sanivark, emerging at last above the top of the mountains of the east with little Keviel trailing along behind, gleamed like a red lantern over his head, showing him the disheartening sight of a second saddle rolling just to the west of him, and what looked very much like a third one westward of that. Neither one had been visible from the village. He would have to cope with both of them, and who knew what obstacles beyond those, before he reached the lowlands.

He did not seem to be the object of any pursuit, at any rate. The village was only dimly visible, gratifyingly far behind him to the east—the smoke of its bonfire, the lights of a few of its houses—and there was no sign that anyone was moving toward him through the scrubby woods between there and here that he had just traversed. So he was free, no longer a commodity, no longer trade-goods being passed on from village to village. His only problem now was staying alive in these wintry woods.

He crouched for a time to the leeward of the saddle-top, catching his breath, letting his sweat dry, nibbling a bit of dried meat, studying the terrain ahead. But there was not going to be any rest for him. When he had stayed there long enough so that he was starting to feel the cold again, Joseph picked up and moved along, scrambling down into the second saddle and onward into the third, which turned out to be a low flattened basin offering no real challenge. The trail had given out, or else he had lost it, but that scarcely mattered. He was fully in the rhythm of it. He moved on and on. There were no more ridges: it was a straight downhill glide now into the misty lands below.

He thought several times of stopping to sleep, but no, he wanted to be out of the high country, entirely out, before he permitted himself to halt. Sanivark went sailing past him overhead, moving into the western sky and showing him his goal, a shrouded realm of drifting whiteness. The mists thinned as he went down toward it, and just as the pale strands of first light began coming over his shoulder he saw a green meadow not far below him, and a stream or perhaps a small river, itself nearly invisible but outlined by a long bank of fog that clung to it like cotton batting.

This was as far as he could go without resting. At the place where the last stretch of highland forest shaded into the meadow bordering the riverbank he found a deserted campsite that probably had been used by hunters in the autumn, and settled into it. There was a little cave that someone had roughly excavated out of the side of the hill, a stone fireplace with cold charcoal still in it and the charred bones of some fair-sized animal scattered about nearby, and a stack of firewood perhaps awaiting use by the returning hunters in the spring. Joseph dined on dried meat and berries and crawled into the cave just as the last few stars were disappearing from the rapidly bluing sky. He unwrapped his fur mantle and curled it around himself, tucked his hands into his robes, and closed his eyes. Sleep rolled over him like a tumbling boulder.

He awoke at midday. A great silence enfolded him, broken only by the screeching caws of the dark birds that were whirling in enormous circles above him in the cloudless sky. The mists had lifted and the sun was bright overhead. He dutifully said his morning prayers and breakfasted sparingly and sat for a long while looking back at the mountains out of which he had

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

come, thinking about his zigzag route through the highlands these past weeks or months and wondering whether in all that time he had succeeded in getting significantly closer to the Southland. He doubted it. Certainly he was somewhat farther south than on the day when he had stood staring at the dismal blackened remains of Ludbrek House, but a map, he suspected, would show him that he had traveled no more than a finger's breadth of the total distance separating him from his father's distant lands.

By this time there would be no reason for anyone at home to think that he was still alive. The Keillorans were basically optimistic people, but they were not fools, and such a degree of optimism would be nothing if not foolhardy. He was here, and they were there, and there was so much territory between that he knew he might just as well start thinking of himself as irretrievably lost, which was not quite the same thing as being dead, but not all that far from it.

I am the only one in the world who knows where I am, he thought. And all I know is that I am *here,* though I have no way of knowing where *here* is.

Joseph looked up at the blank blue screen that was the sky.

"Father!" he cried, setting up echoes as his voice reverberated off the mountains from which he had just descended. "Father, it's me, Joseph! Can you hear me? I'm in Manza, Father! I'm on my way home!"

That was at least as useful as talking into a broken combinant, he told himself. And it was good to hear the sound of a human voice again, even if it was his own. He went down to the stream, stripped, bathed. The water was so cold it felt like fire against his skin, but he had not been able to bathe very often in the mountain villages, and he forced himself through an elaborate ablution. He washed his clothes also, and set them out to dry in the sunlight, sitting naked beside them, shivering but strangely happy in the silence, the isolation, the brightness of the day, the fresh clear air.

And then it was time to get going. There was nothing like a road here for him to follow, not even a footpath, but the land was flat, and after his nighttime scramble through the mountain foothills this seemed almost preposterously easy. Just put one foot forward and then another, on and on, keep the mountains to your left and the stream to the right and the sun shining on your nose, and you will find that you are heading toward home, getting closer with every step you take.

No one seemed to live in this district. He wondered why. The soil seemed fertile enough, there was plenty of fresh water, the climate was probably all right. Yet he saw no sign that the Folk had farmed here, and none of the claimstones that would mark land belonging to one of the Great Houses, and no trace of a settlement of Indigenes, even. But of course this was a large continent and much of it, even after all these centuries of the human presence on Homeworld, was still as it had been when the first Folkish explorers had landed here.

A strange concept, *Folkish explorers.* Joseph had never examined the glaring contradictions in the term before. The Folk were such stolid, unadventurous, spiritless, passive people, or at least that was how he had always regarded them. Everyone did. One did not think of people like that as explorers. It was hard to imagine that any of them could have had enough fervor of the soul to get themselves out into spaceships and travel across the empty light-years and discover Homeworld, and yet they had. Hadn't achieved much once they got here, no, but they had managed to go looking for it, and find it, and settle it.

And yet, stolid and unadventurous and spiritless and passive though they

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

might be, they had also found enough fervor within themselves just now to rise up here in the northern continent or perhaps throughout the entire world and kill most or all of the Masters, and set fire to their houses, and wreck their estates. That was something worth thinking about. Perhaps we have never understood much about the Folk at all, Joseph told himself. Perhaps they are almost as alien to us as the Indigenes or the noctambulos, or the alien races that live on the other worlds of the galaxy.

He went along steadily, marching from sunrise to sundown, stopping to eat whenever he felt hungry, finding some cave or burrow or other sort of shelter for himself at night. The weather grew better every day. Sometimes there were brief rainstorms, mild and pleasant, nothing like the hard chill downpours of the high country. He often took off his clothes and stood naked in the rain, enjoying the sensation of cool clean water striking his skin.

This was beautiful country, still completely devoid of any sort of settlement. There was a springtime feel to the air. Green new growth was appearing everywhere. Dazzling carpets of tiny flowers, some pink, some yellow, sprang up after each rain-shower. They seemed to come straight out of the ground, without any leaves. Joseph made no attempt to keep track of the passing of the days. He still clung to the fantasy that if only he kept walking at this steady pace, ten miles a day, fifteen, however much he might be able to cover, he would come to the bottom of this continent sooner or later and cross over into Helikis, where, he wanted to believe, there had been no Folkish uprising and he would find people to help him get the rest of the way home.

He knew there was some element of folly in the belief that he had been clinging to all this while—without a shred of evidence to support it—that everything was still normal in Helikis. If there had been no rebellion in the southern continent, why had the southern Masters not sent aid to their beleaguered cousins in the north? Why were no military planes roaring northward overhead? Why no armies marching swiftly to set thing to rights? But he wanted to think that all was well in the Southland, because this whole long march of his would be pointless otherwise. Joseph told himself that he had no knowledge about what was going on in most of the world, anyway. In all these months of wandering he had covered only a tiny area of the planet. There might be a tremendous civil war under way on a hundred different battlefields even now, while he, cut off from everything and everyone, plodded southward day by day in solitude through this quiet uninhabited region.

Uninhabited by Masters and Folk and Indigenes, at any rate. There was plenty of animal life. Joseph did not recognize any of the creatures he encountered as he went along, though some of them seemed to be northern variants of animals that were native to the southern continent. There was a plump round beast, quite large, with coarse red fur and a fat little comical tail, that seemed surely to be a relative of the benevongs of the south. There was another, cat-sized, with huge restless eyes and a formidable cloak of twitching blue spines, that beyond much doubt was the local version of the shy, easily frightened thorkins that he had sometimes seen digging for tasty roots along the banks of country streams. But the rest were completely new to him: a squat, broad-nosed climbing animal with brown and yellow spots, and a big, loose-jointed, thick-thighed creature whose tiny, pointed head seemed to have been borrowed from a much smaller animal, and a low-slung snuffling thing, long and sleek, that moved across the land in tightly clustered packs.

None of these showed the slightest fear of him, not even the one that

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

looked like a thorkin. A thorkin of the Southland would have turned and bolted at the first sign of a human, but this animal simply stood its ground and stared. The sleek pack-creatures, who appeared to be browsing for insect nests in the ground, went right on about their business without paying heed to him at all. The big shuffling beast with the small head actually seemed to want to be friendly, wandering up so close that it was Joseph who backed uncertainly away.

One day he stumbled into a small encampment of poriphars in a clearing at the edge of a grove of handsome little white-barked trees, and understood why there were no Indigene villages in these parts. Indigenes would not trespass on the territory of other intelligent beings; and poriphars, like noctambulos and meliots and a couple of other native species, qualified as intelligent, if only just marginally. They were mere naked nomadic beasts, but it was known that they had a language; they had a tribal structure of some sort; they were advanced enough technologically to have the use of fire and simple tools. That was about all Joseph knew about them. A few wandering tribes of poriphars were found in Helikis, but they were mainly a northern species.

He came upon them suddenly, and they seemed as uncertain of how to regard the strange being who had materialized among them as Joseph was to deal with them. There were about a dozen of them, graceful impressive-looking creatures about his own size, with taut, muscular bodies that were densely covered with thick black-and-white striped fur. Their long, narrow, leathery feet ended in powerful curving claws; their black, glossy hands were equipped with small, efficient-looking fingers. They had triangular faces with jutting wolfish snouts terminating in shiny black noses. Their eyes, large and bright and round, a deep blue-black in color, were protected by heavy brow-ridges.

The poriphars were sitting in a circle around a crude oven made of rocks, roasting spitted fish over the flames. When Joseph stepped out from behind a great gray boulder into their midst, very much to his surprise and theirs, they reacted with immediate uneasiness, moving closer to one another, bodies going tense, nostrils quivering. Their eyes were fixed closely on him, warily, as though a solitary human being, traveling on foot and carrying no visible weapons, might actually pose some threat to this band of strong, sturdy animals.

Slowly and clearly Joseph said, speaking in Indigene, "I am a traveler. There is no one else with me. I am going southward."

No response. The same wary glances.

"I am hungry. Can you give me some food?"

The same keen stares, nothing more.

The aroma of the roasting fish was overwhelming. It filled the air. Joseph felt famished, almost dizzy with hunger. He had eaten nothing but dried meat and berries for days, in decreasing quantities as his supplies began to run low. He had practically none left by now.

"Can you understand me?" he asked. He patted his abdomen. "Hunger. Food."

Nothing.

He had often heard that all the various intelligent life-forms of Homeworld were able to speak Indigene, but perhaps that was not true. Without much hope Joseph tried them in Folkish and then Master, with the same result. But when he patted his stomach again and pointed silently to one of the skewers of fish, then to his own lips, and pantomimed the act of chewing

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and swallowing, they seemed to comprehend at once. A brief debate ensued among them. Their language was one of rapid clicks and buzzing drones, probably impossible for human vocal apparatus to imitate.

Then one of the poriphars stood—it was a head taller than Joseph; it probably could have killed him with one swipe of those sinewy arms—and yanked a skewer of fish from the fire. Carefully, using those agile little fingers with an almost finicky precision, it pried a thick slab of pale pinkish meat from the fish and handed it to him.

"Thank you," Joseph said, with great gravity.

He performed an elaborate salute, touching his forehead and his chest and bowing. Most likely the gesture had no meaning whatever for the poriphars, but it was the best he could do. He wished he had something to offer them in return, but he doubted that his remaining berries would interest them, and there was nothing else he could spare.

The temptation to cram the fish into his mouth and bolt it all down at once was a hard thing to resist, but Joseph ate as slowly as he could. It had a sweet, smoky flavor, heartbreakingly delicious. The poriphars remained quite motionless while he ate, watching him. Occasionally one of them made a clicking, buzzing comment. They still seemed uneasy. Their restiveness was an almost palpable thing.

Joseph had been alone for so many days that he wanted to stay for a while, somehow to talk with them, to tell them about himself and learn things about them, perhaps to find out about the nature of the route that lay ahead, or even about the civil war. But of course all that was impossible. There was no way to communicate. And he did not need a degree in alien psychology to understand that they had no interest in making his acquaintance, that the only thing they desired from him was that he remove himself from their presence without further delay.

Which he did, after making a final brief speech in Indigene on the off chance that they might indeed know something of that language. He apologized for having disturbed them and told them how grateful he was for their kindness in feeding a lone hungry wanderer, how he would if in any way he could repay their hospitality at another time. To this they made no reply, or showed any indication that they had understood. He walked away from them without looking back.

A couple of days later he saw a plane pass high overhead—the first manifestation of the outside world since he had fled from the Indigenes. Joseph stood staring up, wondering whether he was experiencing some hallucination brought on by hunger. The plane was so far above him, a mere dark winged speck in the sky, that he could hardly hear it at all, nothing more than a distant faint humming sound such as an insect might have made, nor could he identify it in any way. It was traveling in a northwesterly direction. Whose plane was it? Was it possible that they still could have regular commuter service between Helikis and Manza?

It seemed like a thousand years ago that he had made his own flight northward. Ten thousand; a million. The airstrip at Keilloran; the excitement of departure; his father and brothers and sisters loading him down with gifts to bring the Getfens; Anceph and Rollin climbing aboard with the luggage, and then Balbus, beckoning to him to follow. The flight had taken eleven hours, the longest flight of his life. How creaky he had felt when he disembarked at the Getfen airstrip! But then, his fair-haired laughing Getfen cousins all around him, sturdy Wykkin and bright-eyed Dorian and lovely fragrant

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Kesti, and dark, stocky Gryilin Master Getfen behind them, his hosts for the summer, his new friends, the companions of his coming-of-age year—

Ten million years ago. A billion.

The plane, if a plane indeed was what it was, vanished from sight in the northern sky. Now that it was gone he began to doubt that he had really seen it. There must not be any planes flying any more, he told himself. If you wanted to go from one continent to another these days you would have to do it on foot, a journey that would take three years, or five, or forever. We have become prehistoric here. Something terrible has happened on Homeworld and a great silence has fallen over everything, he thought. The rebellious Folk have risen up in wrath and hurled the world back into medieval times—but not even the medieval time of Homeworld, but that of Old Earth, the time of candlelight and horses and tournaments of chivalry. What actually had horses been? he wondered. Something like bandars, Joseph guessed, swift high-spirited animals that you rode from place to place, or set against one another in races.

The plane, real or not, had reminded him of how easy it once had been to travel from one place to another on Homeworld, and how difficult, how wellnigh impossible, it had become. Heartsick, he thought of the vast curving breast of the world that lay before him, the great impossible span of distance. What madness it had been to think he could ever walk from Getfen to Keilloran! Joseph sank down against the ground, forehead pressing against his knees. His head swam with despair.

Up, he told himself sternly.

Up and get yourself moving. One step and another and another, and someday you will be home.

Perhaps.

But the last of the food he had brought with him from the Indigene village was gone. Joseph found himself thinking longingly of the stewed meat they ate in those villages, the porridges, the milky wine. He had not much liked the wine then, but now he tasted it in his mind and it seemed heavenly, the finest taste in the universe. He imagined a silvery shimmering in the air before him and a flask of the wine miraculously dropping out of nowhere at his feet, and perhaps a pan of the braised illimani meat too. That did not happen. All the euphoria of those early springtime days when he had first come down out of the mountains had disappeared. The carpets of pretty pink flowers, the green blush of new foliage, the sweet fresh spring rain falling on his naked body—that was all so far behind him now that it seemed like something he had dreamed. I am going to starve to death, Joseph thought.

He dug along stream-banks in the hope of finding mud-crawlers, but mud-crawlers did not seem to live here. He did find roots and bulbs that looked as though they might be safe to eat, and nibbled on them experimentally, making mental notes about which ones went down easily and which upset his stomach. He chewed the tender new shoots of bushes for their sweet juice. He broke into a nest of sash-weevils and coolly, methodically, ate the little yellow grubs. They had almost no taste; it was like eating bits of straw. But there had to be some nourishment in them somewhere, for they were living things.

You must not let yourself die of hunger, he told himself. You are Joseph Master Keilloran and you are on your way home to your family, and you need to maintain your strength for the long journey that lies ahead.

He no longer bothered to wash very often. The fresh, sparkling water of the streams felt too cold against his skin, now that there was so little flesh on his bones. His skin began to break out with little white-tipped red erup-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tions, but that seemed the least of his problems. He stopped washing his clothing, too, but for a different reason: the fabric had grown so threadbare and tattered that Joseph was afraid the robe would fall apart entirely if he subjected it to the stress of washing it.

He threw rocks at basking lizards, but never once did he hit one. They always seemed to come awake the moment he raised his arm and go scurrying away with astonishing speed. He ripped the bark from a tree and discovered brightly striped beetles underneath, and in a kind of wondering amazement at his own boldness—or perhaps, Joseph decided, it was only his own desperation—he put them into his mouth, one at a time. He ate ants. He broke a branch from a little tree and swung it through the air, trying to bat down insects with it, and actually caught some that way. He was surprised to observe how easily he could adapt to eating insects.

He talked to the animals that he met as he went along. They came out and stared at him without fear, and Joseph nodded to them and smiled and introduced himself, and asked whether they had heard anything about the war between Folk and Masters, and invited them to advise him on the edibility of the plants that grew nearby. Since they were creatures that were below the threshold of intelligence, they neither understood nor replied, but they did pause and listen. It occurred to Joseph that he should be trying to catch and kill some of them for their meat instead of holding these nonsensical conversations with them, but by this time he was too slow and weak to try that, and it seemed impolite, besides. They were his friends, companions of the way.

"I am Joseph Master Keilloran," he told them, "and I would be most grateful if you would send word to my family that I am on my way home to them."

He felt very giddy much of the time. His vision often became blurry. Hunger, he knew, was doing something to his brain. He hoped the damage would not be permanent.

One night Joseph was awakened by a blazing brightness on the horizon, a lovely red-and-yellow dome that quickly elongated to become a river of light climbing into the sky. Slowly he came to understand that it was a great fire somewhere very far off, and he wondered if the civil war was still going on, and, if so, who was attacking whom, and where. The brightness gave way to black smoke, and then he could see nothing at all.

Much later that same night, not long before sunrise, the thought came to Joseph as he lay in mazy suspension somewhere between sleep and wakefulness that if he were to hold his toes turned inward in a certain way as he walked he would be able to move two or even three times as fast as he usually did, and might even be able to leave the ground altogether and skate homeward two or three feet up in the air. It was an exciting idea. He could hardly wait for day to arrive, so he could put it to a test. But when he remembered it after he arose he saw the absurdity of it at once and was frightened to think that he had been able to entertain such a lunatic notion more or less seriously, even though he had not been fully awake at the time.

Whole days went by when Joseph found nothing to eat but ants. He did not even attempt to throw rocks at lizards any more, although they were abundant all around him, plump green ones with spiky red crests. Their meat, he imagined, was wonderfully succulent. But they were much too fast for him. And though he spent a great deal of time crouching beside streams trying to catch small darting fishes with his hand, they eluded him with ridiculous ease. He had stopped digging up roots or pulling green shoots

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

from plants by this time, for he had begun to think they were poisoning him and was afraid to eat them.

He began to have headaches. His tongue seemed swollen and had a coppery taste. He could hear the blood pounding insistently in his temples. He shook constantly and walked with his arms wrapped tightly about his body as though he were still contending with the cold rain of the wintry highlands, though by all the outward signs he could tell that the days were growing steadily warmer, that it must be getting practically to be summer. Sometimes when Joseph had walked no more than half an hour he found it necessary to sit down and rest for ten or fifteen minutes, and occasionally longer. And then came a day when he could not continue at all after one of those rest-periods, when he simply settled down under a bush and let the time stretch on and on without getting up.

As he lay there he tried to conjure up a meal for himself out of nothing more than his imagination, a plate of sweet river-crabs followed by roast haunch of heggan in mint sauce, with baked compolls on the side, and a steaming brisbil pudding afterward. He had almost managed to delude himself into believing that he had really done it, that he had just enjoyed a rich, tasty dinner and was feeling much the better for it, when he regained enough clarity of mind to realize that it had been nothing more than a pleasant fantasy, that his stomach was still empty, that in fact he was on the verge of dying of starvation. He knew he was dying and almost did not care.

He lay back and closed his eyes. It seemed to him then that he heard the sounds of rumbling wheels nearby, of swiftly moving vehicles, as though there might be a highway just beyond the hedge across the way. But that had to be a delusion too. He had walked through this beautiful countryside for days, weeks, maybe even months, without ever finding any trace of civilized life other than the hunters' camp that he had come upon on his very first day down from the mountains. The nearest settlement of any kind was probably still a hundred miles away. He would not live to see it.

He realized then that he did care, at least a little, that his life was reaching its end.

How embarrassing it is, Joseph thought, to be dying like this, not even sixteen years old, the heir to House Keilloran transformed into a ragged bundle of skin and bones lying under a bush in some unknown corner of Middle Manza. He had always been so competent, so very good at looking after himself. What were they going to think back in Keilloran when the news finally reached them of what had happened to him? Martin would not weep, no. One quick wince, perhaps: that would be all the outward sign of emotion he would permit himself to show. His father had not even wept when his own beloved wife had died, so suddenly and senselessly, of the bite of that harmless-looking little red toad that had fallen from a tree and landed on her arm. Probably he had never wept in his life. But Joseph knew what her death had done to his father inside, and he knew what his own death would do to him, too.

And his brother Eitan, who was six years younger than Joseph was and had always worshipped him—Eitan would simply not be able to believe that his wondrous brother Joseph had perished in this idiotic way. Eitan would deny the news; he would be angered by it, he would pound the messenger furiously with his fists, he would turn to his father and say in that solemn old-man manner of his, "This is not true, Joseph would never have allowed such a thing to befall him."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

And Rickard, three years older than Eitan—he would be angry too, but not for the same reason. Rickard, who now would have to become the heir to House Keilloran: how he would boil with rage at the realization that those responsibilities were unexpectedly going to be dumped upon him! Rickard was not the sort to run a Great House: everyone knew that, Rickard best of all. He was a clever boy, too clever for his own good, so bright that his intelligence worked against him. Rickard could always find ways to avoid handling anything difficult. Either he would sidestep any real challenge or he would simply allow it to flow around him like water around a boulder in a riverbed, whichever was easier. But it had never been necessary for him to be otherwise. He was only the second son. Joseph was the heir; Rickard knew he could look forward to a life of ease.

Perhaps Rickard would change, now that there was no Joseph and he was going to be the first in line to inherit. Now that he could see the duties that went with being the Master of House Keilloran heading toward him like an avalanche. Joseph hoped so. Perhaps Cailin would help him. She was fourteen, old enough to understand these things, old enough to show Rickard that it would no longer suffice for him to slide by on mere cleverness, that he must take the trouble now to put that cleverness of his to responsible uses, inasmuch as his older brother was dead and he would someday be the Master of the House in his own right. She was a wise girl, Cailin, much undervalued by everyone, as girls tended to be. He wished now that he had treated her better.

Of course Joseph thought of his father, too, that stern, serious, studious man whom Joseph had never come to know as closely as he would have liked to. He never would, now. One thought led to another and he saw other and more ghostly members of his family standing before him, his mother the Mistress Wireille, who had betrayed them all by dying so young, and then his father's father, old Master Eirik, who had always seemed so forbidding of mien with his great white beard and jutting nose and tight-clamped scowling lips, but who actually had been the warmest and most kindhearted of men, the ruler of the House for sixty years and beloved by all. Joseph remembered how fond his grandfather had been of telling tales of the Keilloran Masters of times gone by, the whole long line, an earlier Joseph and an earlier Martin and an earlier Eirik, far back into the first days of the Masters of Homeworld, the same names over and over, bold visionary men who had carved out the family domain in the bounteous subtropical Southland and ruled it with wisdom and foresight and justice. Joseph, only a small boy then, had felt an enormous sense of pride at hearing those stories, at knowing that he was descended from that long line of Keillorans, that one day he would sit where they had sat, and would discharge the awesome duties of his post in a way that showed that he was worthy of his inheritance, and would in his turn continue the line by engendering the Masters who would follow him—

"Easy with him," someone was saying. "Will break in pieces if you handle him too rough, that one."

"No meat on's bones, none. None. Half dead, he is."

"Half and more. Easy, now. Up with him. Up."

His mind was still full of thoughts of his grandfather, and of his grandfather's grandfathers back through time. It seemed to him that one of the voices he was hearing, a deep, gruff one, was his grandfather's voice, the voice of Eirik Master Keilloran, who had made a special journey to Middle Manza to rescue his errant grandson. Could that be? His grandfather was dead these ten years past, was he not? Perhaps not. Perhaps that was he,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

right here; now, his father's father, that wonderful fierce-looking old man. Who would scoop him up, take him in his arms, stride easily from province to province with him until he was home again in Keilloran.

"Grandfather?" Joseph said. He did not open his eyes. "Is that really you, grandfather?"

There was no answer. He was not at all sure that he had actually spoken aloud.

But it definitely was true that he was being lifted, carefully, very carefully, cradled like a dangling cloak across someone's outstretched arms. The stirring of fresh air around Joseph's head brought him back a little way into conscious awareness, and he opened his eyes a bit, peering out through slitted lids. There were two men, neither of them his grandfather, though one, the one with the deep, gruff voice, was indeed old and bearded. But his beard was an untidy straggling thing and he was a short, heavy-set man wearing a tight yellow jerkin and loose-fitting trousers that flared at the cuffs, Folkish clothes, and his face, framed by his long unkempt grayish hair, was a pure Folkish face, coarse-featured, heavy-jawed, bulbous-nosed. The other man, the one who was carrying him, looked much younger, and Folkish also. And Folkish was what they were speaking, though it was a strangely slurred Folkish, very nasal, not at all familiar.

Joseph realized that he himself, when he had cried out a moment ago to his grandfather, would surely have spoken in Master. So if he really had spoken aloud they must know what he was, and thus all of his months of strenuous travail had been in vain. He had been captured by the rebels anyway, and now, he assumed, they were going to put him to death.

Well, what did that matter? He would not have lived more than another day or two anyhow, even if they had not found him. But if they meant to kill him, why were they going to all the trouble of picking him up and carrying him somewhere? They could finish him off with one quick twist of his skinny neck, the way the noctambulo had killed the mud-crawlers in the Getfen forest.

Perhaps he had not really said anything out loud, then. So they had no hint of who or what he might be, other than some pathetic starving wretch asleep under a bush, a lost soul in need of help. For the first time since the really serious weakness and dizziness had come over him Joseph felt a faint glimmering hope that he might actually survive a little longer.

They were both holding him, the older man gripping him by the ankles, the other under his arms, as they swung him upward and gently lowered him into a vehicle of some sort, not an open wagon of the kind he had grown accustomed to during his travels between one Indigene village and the next, but an actual truck. They tucked him in so that he was sitting upright. Joseph leaned back and drew shallow breaths and waited for the next thing to happen.

"Have a bit of bread, will you?" the older one asked.

Joseph only nodded. His mind felt so muzzy that he did not want to attempt framing a sentence in Folkish just yet, and he was afraid to answer in Master.

The other one took Joseph's hand and pressed something into it: a torn-off chunk of bread, it was, hard, grayish, much the same sort of rough peasant stuff that the Getfen woman—what was her name? Joseph was unable to remember, though he remembered her clearly enough—had given him the night that all this began. Hungry as he was, Joseph stared at it a long while before he put it to his lips. He was not sure that he could get it down. The thought came to him of that old Folkish man he had found cowering in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the subcellars of Ludbrek House—Waerna, that was his name, he could at least remember that one—and how, offered food and drink for what perhaps was the first time in many days, the old man had looked at it timidly, afraid to try to eat. Now he was as close to starvation as Waerna had been then, floating in a dreamy half-world where swallowing a bite of bread was, perhaps, an impossible task. He knew he had to try. His two Folkish rescuers were softly urging him, in their odd, slurred Folkish, to have a little. But when Joseph attempted it he was unable to manage even one bite. The bread seemed as hard as stone against the tips of his teeth, and when he touched his tongue to it, purely to feel the flavor of it, disgust rose in him and something squirmed within his gut like a wild animal struggling to break free. Joseph turned his head aside, wincing.

"Very thirsty," he said. "Drink—first. Can't—eat."

He said it in Folkish. Did they understand him? Yes. Yes. The older one put a flask to his lips. Water, it was. Joseph drank, cautiously at first, then more deeply. That was better. Once again he attempted the bread, and was able this time to take a tiny bite. He chewed at it unendingly, got it down at last, felt it almost immediately trying to come back up. Somehow he held it down. Had another bite. Another. Better, yes.

The younger one said, "A bit of meat, now?"

The mere idea made Joseph feel ill. He shook his head.

"You wouldn't be wanting wine just now either, then."

"No. No."

"They can see after him in town," the older one said. "We needs be going now."

Joseph heard the sound of the truck's engine starting up. He remembered then the things he had been carrying, his few possessions, his pack, his utility case, the fur mantle that he had brought with him from the Indigene village. He did not want to leave those things behind, forlorn and abandoned under that bush. "Wait," Joseph said. "There were some things of mine there—my belongings—"

The younger man grunted something and jumped down from the truck. When he returned, only a few moments later, he was carrying everything with him. With curious delicacy he spread Joseph's mantle out over his knees, and gave him the other things, not without a puzzled frown as he handed over the utility case. Then the truck started up.

Joseph realized from the swiftness of the man's return that his recent resting-place must have been no more than a few yards off the road that they were traveling now. The traffic-sounds that he had heard while lying in his stupor had been no illusions, then. He had managed to make his way nearly back to civilization, or civilization's edge, anyway, though the last of his energy had left him before he had actually reached it, and he would have died under that bush if these men had not found him. They must have gone off a short way into the underbrush to relieve themselves, Joseph thought, and by that little happenstance alone had his life been saved. If indeed it had been saved. His weakened body might not recover, he knew, from the stresses of his long solitary march. And even if he did regain some measure of health, it was still not at all clear what was going to happen to him now, a fugitive Master who had fallen into the hands of the Folk.

They drove for what might have been hours. Joseph drifted in and out of consciousness. From time to time he heard one of the men speaking to him, and he answered as well as he could, but it was hard for him to remember, a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

moment later, what they or he had said. Had they asked him where he was heading? Had he told them? He hoped that they were going south, in any event, and tried to reckon their direction from the position of the sun as he glimpsed it through the truck's little side window.

He was not sure at first how to interpret what he saw. The sun seemed to be in front of them as they journeyed down the highway, and that felt wrong, somehow. But then Joseph reminded himself that in this hemisphere the sun was supposed to be in the southern part of the sky. So that was all right. If they were traveling toward the sun, they must be going south. He could see it out of the right-hand window, which meant that this must be afternoon, since the sun moved across the sky from east to west, and west had to be to the right if they were going south. Yes? Yes. His mind felt very clear, icy-cold, and yet it was so very hard to think properly: everything was a terrible effort. I have damaged myself through lack of food, Joseph told himself again. I have made myself stupid, perhaps permanently so. Even if I do get back to House Keilloran eventually I will no longer be qualified to do a Master's work, and I will have to step aside and let Rickard inherit the House, and how he will hate that! But what else can I do, if I have become too stupid to govern the estate?

It was a painful thing to consider. He let himself glide into sleep, and did not awaken again until the truck had come to a halt and the two men were lifting him out of it, treating him as they had before, as though he were very fragile, as though any but the gentlest handling might shatter him.

Joseph could barely stand. He leaned against the younger of his two rescuers, locking his arm inside the man's, and tried as well as he could to stay upright, but he kept swaying and beginning to topple, and had to be pulled back again and again to a standing position.

They had reached a village: a Folkish village, Joseph supposed. Its layout was nothing like that of the Indigene villages in which he had lived for so many months. This was no dense, dark warren in the Indigene style, tight rows of conical mud-and-wattle houses crowded together in hive-like fashion around a central plaza of ceremonial buildings with the village's communal growing-fields beyond. Here Joseph saw scatterings of small squarish wooden buildings with thatched roofs and stubby stone chimneys rising above them, set widely apart, each house with a low picket fence around it and its own pleasant little kitchen-garden in front and what looked like stables for domestic animals to the rear. Untidy grassy strips ran between the villagers' dwellings. Dusk was beginning to descend. Burning stakes set into the ground provided illumination. To one side ran a canal, spanned here and there by arching wooden bridges. Off the other way there was a big domed building standing by itself that was surmounted by the Folkish holy symbol, the solar disk with rays of sunlight streaming from it, marking it as the village's house of worship. The closest thing to a main plaza was the expanse of bare skinned ground where the truck had halted, but this was a mere parking area that could not have had any ceremonial significance. Vehicles of all kinds were scattered about it, wagons and carts and trucks and harvesting-machines.

His arrival, he saw, was causing a stir. Little groups of curious villagers came out of the houses to inspect him. Most of them hung back, pointing and murmuring, but one, a short, spraddle-legged man with the widest shoulders Joseph had ever seen, scarcely any neck, and a blunt bullet-shaped head, came right up to him and gave him a long moment of intense,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

piercing scrutiny. "This is Stappin," whispered the man who was holding him up. "Governor of the town, he is." And indeed Joseph was readily able to discern the aura of authority, strength, and imperturbable self-confidence that this man radiated. They were traits that he had no difficulty recognizing. His father had them—the Master of any Great House would—and Joseph had seen them in the Ardardin, too, and in some of the other Indigene chieftains along the way. They were necessities of leadership. The aim of Joseph's entire education had been to enable him to develop those traits in himself.

"Why, is just a boy!" Stappin said, after studying Joseph for a time. "Looks old, he does. But those are young eyes. —Who are you, boy? What are you doing here?"

Joseph dared not admit that he was a Master. But he had failed to prepare himself for this moment. He said the first thing that leaped into his mind, hoping that it was the right thing: "I am Waerna of Ludbrek House."

There was no reason why they would ever have heard that name all the way down here. But if by some chance they had, and said that they knew Waerna of Ludbrek House and he was an old man, Joseph intended simply to tell them that he was the grandson of the Waerna they knew, and had the same name.

Stappin did not react to the name or his implied claim of Folkish blood, though. Joseph went on, "When the estate where I lived was destroyed in the rebellion, I fled into the mountains. Now I have no home at all."

The words drained the last of his stamina. His knees turned to water and he slumped down, sagging against the man who held him. Everything became unclear to him after that, until he opened his eyes and discovered that he was inside one of the cottages, lying in an actual bed—no piles of furry skins here—with an actual blanket over him and a pillow under his head. A Folkish woman was looking down at him with motherly concern. By the sputtering light of candles set in sconces against the walls Joseph saw four or five other figures in the room, a boy or youngish man, a girl, and several others lost in the shadows.

The woman said, "Will you take some tea, Waerna?"

He nodded and sat up. The blanket slipped away, showing him that they had removed his clothes: he saw them now, his filthy Indigene robes, lying in a heap beside the bed. It appeared that they had bathed him, too: his skin had a fresh, cool feeling that it had not had in many days.

The woman put a mug of warm tea in his hand. Joseph drank it slowly. It was very mild, faintly sweet, easy to swallow. Afterward the woman watched him for a time, to see how well he kept it down. He was managing it. Something was cooking in another room, some soup or stew simmering over a fire, and the smell of it made him a little uneasy, but the tea seemed to have settled his stomach fairly well.

"Would you like something else to eat?" the woman asked.

"I think so," Joseph said. The woman turned and said something to the girl, who went out of the room. Joseph was afraid that she was going to bring him whatever it was they were cooking in there, which he knew he would not be able to deal with, but when she came back a little while later she was bearing two slices of bread on a plate, and a mug of warm milk. She knelt beside the bed to offer them to him, smiling encouragingly. He nibbled at the bread, which was soft and airy, much easier to get down than the hard crust he had been offered in the truck, and took a sip or two of the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

milk. The girl kept looking at him, still smiling, holding out the plate of bread in case he should feel capable of eating more.

He liked the way she smiled. It was a pretty smile, he thought. She looked quite pretty herself, as Folkish girls went: her face very broad, as they all tended to be, strong bones, a wide nose, full lips, but her skin was pale and clear and her hair, straight and cropped short, was a soft golden color. So far as he was able to tell she was about his age, or perhaps a year or two older. I must be feeling better already to be noticing these things, he told himself.

It troubled him that when he sat up like this the whole upper part of his body was bared to her, and she could see how scrawny he had become. That embarrassed him. He looked like a dead man, a skeleton that somehow still was covered with skin. But then he shivered, and the woman—was she the girl's mother?—noticed that at once and put a wrap around his shoulders, a woolen thing, coarse and heavy, that felt unpleasantly scratchy against his skin but did at least hide his shrunken arms and hollow chest from view as well as keeping him warm. He took a few more bites of the bread and finished the milk.

"More?" the woman asked.

"I think not. Not just yet."

They were being very kind to him. Didn't they suspect, from his slender build and finely formed features and whatever hints of a Master accent in his voice he was unable to conceal, that he was a member of the enemy race? Apparently not. They would know nothing of what a southern Master accent sounded like here, anyway; and as for his long limbs and his tapering nose and his thin lips, well, there had been more than a little interbreeding down through the centuries, and it was not all that uncommon for members of the Folk to show some physical traits of the ruling class. It did seem that they accepted him for what he claimed to be, a young man of their own kind, a refugee from a far-away destroyed House.

"You should rest again now," the woman said, and they all went out of the room.

He wandered off into a dreamless dozing reverie. Later, he could not possibly have said how much later, the boy or young man who had been in his room before came in with a bowl of the stuff they had been cooking and a plate of a grayish mashed vegetable, and Joseph tried without success to eat some. "I'll leave it in case you want it," the boy said. Again Joseph was alone.

Some time later he awoke with a full bladder, stumbled out of bed in the darkness with no good idea of where he ought to go, and tripped over some small piece of furniture, sending himself sprawling with a crash into something else, a little bedside table on which they had left a pitcher of water for him. The pitcher, landing on what seemed to be a stone floor, made a sound as it broke that he was certain would wake the whole household, but no one came. Joseph crouched where he had fallen, trembling, dizzy. After a few moments he rose unsteadily and tiptoed out into the hall. Because they had left him naked below the waist, and he did not want to reveal his emaciated thighs and belly to anyone he might encounter out there, especially not the girl, he took the coverlet from his bed and wrapped it around his hips. In the hallway there was just enough moonlight coming in so that he could see other bedrooms, and hear the sound of snoring coming from one or two of them. But he could not find anything that might be a lavatory.

He needed very badly to go by this time. A door presented itself that turned out to be the main door of the house, and he went outside, into the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

yard, moving steadily but with an invalid's slow, cautious pace. All was silent out there. The whole village seemed to be asleep. The night was warm, the air very still. The two smaller moons were in the sky. A big brown dog lay curled up against the picket fence. It opened one yellow eye and made a soft, short growling sound, but did not otherwise react to Joseph's presence. He walked past it, following along the line of the fence until he judged he was sufficiently far from the house, and opened the coverlet and urinated against a bush. Because all of his bodily functions had become so deranged, it took him an incredibly long time to do it, what seemed like hours. How strange, he thought, to be standing here like this in the yard of a Folkish house, peeing outdoors by moonlight, peeing slowly and endlessly the way an old man does. But all of this is a dream, is it not? It must be. It must.

He found his way back to his own bedroom without incident and dropped at once into deep sleep, the first really sound sleep he had had in more weeks than he could remember. When he awoke, it was long after daylight: floods of golden sunshine were pouring into the room. Someone had come in while he slept, picked up the overturned table, removed the fragments of the broken pitcher. The bowl of stew and the plate of mashed vegetables were still sitting on the cupboard where the boy who had brought them had left them. A stab of hunger pierced through him suddenly and he sprang from the bed, or tried to, but dizziness instantly overcame him and he had to sit again, trembling a little, racked by little shuddering spasms. When the shuddering stopped he got up again, very carefully this time, slowly crossed the room, ate a few spoonfuls of the vegetables, sipped at the stew. He was not as hungry as he had thought he was. Still, he was able to keep the food down, and after a little while he managed to eat some more of it.

They had put out clothing for him, good honest Folkish dress—brown cotton leggings, a singlet of gray wool, a leather vest, a pair of open sandals. Nothing fit him very well: the leggings were too short, the singlet too tight, the vest too loose across the shoulders, the sandals too small. Probably most or all of these things belonged to the boy of the house. But wearing them, ill-fitting or not, was better than going about naked, or wrapping himself in his bedsheet, or trying to get back into his filthy Indigene robes.

The woman who had cared for him last night came into the room. He saw that she was forty or so, plump, with weary dark-shadowed eyes but a warm, ingratiating smile. The girl and the young man who had been in the room last night were with her again. "I am Saban," the woman said. "My daughter Thayle. Velk, my son." Velk appeared to be eighteen or twenty, short, strongly built, dull-eyed, probably not terribly bright. Thayle did not seem as pretty as she had last night, now that Joseph could see the Folkish stockiness of her frame, but she looked sweet and cheerful and Joseph liked her smooth clear skin and the bright sheen of her yellow hair. He doubted that she was any older than sixteen, perhaps even a year or two younger; but it was very hard to tell. The Folk always looked older than they really were to him, because they tended to be so sturdily built, so deep-chested and thick-shouldered. Saban indicated a third person standing in a diffident slouch farther back in the room and said, "That is my man, Simthot." About fifty, shorter even than his son, a burly man with powerful arms and shoulders, deeply tanned skin, the creases of a lifetime of hard work furrowing his expressionless face. "You are a guest in our house as long as you need to stay," said Saban, and Simthot nodded emphatically. He appeared to be accustomed to letting his wife do the talking for him.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I feel much better this morning," Joseph told her. "It was good to sleep in a comfortable bed again, and to be able to eat a little food. I thank you for all your kindnesses."

Was that too formal, too Master-like? Even though he spoke in Folkish, he was afraid of betraying his aristocratic origins by expressing himself too well. He wondered if a Folkish boy of fifteen or sixteen would ever be as articulate as that.

But Saban showed no sign of suspicion. She told him only that she was pleased that the night's rest had done him good, and warned him not to try to recover too quickly. The town governor, would come here later in the day to speak with him. Meanwhile, she suggested, he ought to get back into bed.

That seemed wise to him. He no longer felt as though he were on the brink of death, but he knew he had a long way to go before he had some semblance of vigor again.

Thayle brought him tea with honey in it, and stood by his bedside while he drank it. When he was done Joseph asked her for more of the bread she had given him the night before, and she brought that too, and watched him in a kind of placid satisfaction as he nibbled at it. Like her mother, she appeared to be taking an almost maternal interest in his welfare.

He needed to urinate again, and perhaps even to move his bowels, something he had not succeeded in doing in many days. But he still did not know where to go. Though Joseph would not have hesitated to ask a servant for the location of the nearest privy, if he were a guest in some Great House, he felt oddly inhibited about asking the girl. He was not even sure of the word for it in Folkish; that was part of the problem. But he knew he was being ridiculous. After a time he said, feeling heat rise to his cheeks, "Thayle, I have to—if you would please show me—"

She understood immediately, of course. He would not let her help him rise from the bed, though there was a bad moment of vertigo when he did, and he refused her arm as they went from the room. The lavatory was at the back of the house. Because he knew she was waiting for him outside to guide him back to his room, he tried to be as quick about things as he could, but his body was still not functioning normally, and he could not look her in the eye when he finally emerged a long time afterward. All she said was, "Would you like to go outside for some fresh air and sunshine?"

"I'd like that very much, yes," he told her.

They emerged into the kitchen-garden. The warm sunlight felt good against his face. She stood very close beside him, as though afraid he might be too weak to stand on his own for long. The firm curve of her breast was pressing into his side. Joseph was surprised to observe how much he liked that. He was actually beginning to find her attractive despite or perhaps even because of her Folkish look, which was somewhat unsettling, though in an interesting way. I suppose I have been away from my own people too long, he thought.

He guessed that it was probably about noon. Very few townsfolk were around, just some very small children playing in the dust and a few old people busy on the porches of their houses. The rest were working in the fields, Joseph assumed, or accompanying their herds through the pastures. A peaceful scene. The dog that had been sleeping out here last night was still curled up on the ground, and again it gave him one quick one-eyed inspection and a soft little growl before subsiding into sleep. It was not easy to believe that elsewhere on Homeworld a bloody war was going on, estates being pillaged and burned, people driven into exile.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"What is this village called?" Joseph asked, after a little while.

"It's a town, not a village," Thayle said.

Evidently that was an important distinction. "This town, then."

"You don't know? Its name is Eysar Haven."

"Ah. Eysar Haven."

"Originally it was called something else, though that was so long ago that nobody remembers what. But then the name was changed to Eysar Haven, because he actually came here once, you know."

"He? Eysar, you mean?"

"Yes, of course, Eysar. Who else? He was really here. Some people don't even believe that Eysar truly existed, that he's just a myth, but it isn't so. He was here. He stayed for weeks and weeks, while he was making the Crossing. We know that to be a fact. And after he left the town was named for him. It's wonderful to think that we walk on the very same ground that Eysar's feet once touched, isn't it?"

"Yes. It certainly is," said Joseph carefully.

He felt that he was in dangerous territory here. There was a note of reverence and awe in Thayle's voice. Eysar must be some great Folkish hero, whose name was known to one and all in the Folkish world. But Joseph had never heard of him. *He stayed for weeks and weeks, while he was making the Crossing.* What could that mean? A Master's education did not include a great deal of Folkish history, nor Folkish mythology, for that matter. For all Joseph knew, Eysar had been a great Folkish king in the days before the Conquest, or the leader of the first Folkish expedition to land on Homeworld, or perhaps some sort of charismatic wonderworking religious leader. The thought that the Folk once had had great kings of their own, or glorious heroes, or revered religious leaders, and that they still cherished the memory of those great men, was a little startling to him, simply because it had never occurred to him before. And certainly it would not do at all for Thayle to find out that he had no knowledge of who this Eysar was, or the Crossing, or, for that matter, of any significant datum of Folkish life or culture.

He searched for a way to change the subject. But Thayle did the job for him.

"And where is it you come from?" she asked. "Ludbrek House, you said. Where is that?"

"Up in the north. On the other side of the mountains."

"That far? You've come a very great distance, then. It's hard to believe anyone could travel as far as that on foot. No wonder you suffered so much. —That's a strange name for a town, Ludbrek House."

"That's not the town name. It's the name of the Great House that ruled the district."

"A Master-house?" Thayle said. "Is that what you mean?"

She spoke as though the system of Great Houses with satellite towns of Folk around them was nearly as unfamiliar to her as the deeds of Eysar were to him.

"A Master-house, yes," he said. "We all belonged to Ludbrek House, many hundreds of us. But then the rebels burned it and I ran away. You don't belong to any House here, then, is that right?"

"Of course not. You are among cuylings here. You mean you didn't realize that?"

"Yes—yes, of course, I don't know what I could have been thinking—"

Cuylings.

That word was new to him also. It must refer to free Folk, Folk who had

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

managed to stay clear of the rule of the Masters, holding themselves somehow apart from the dominant economic structure of the world. Again Joseph saw how little he knew of these people, and what risks that posed for him. If he allowed this conversation to go on much longer she was bound to find out that he was an impostor. He needed to interrupt it.

He shook his head as though trying to clear it of cobwebs, and swayed, and gave a deliberate little lurch that sent him stumbling into her. As he came up against her he began to let himself fall, but she caught him easily—he was so light, so flimsy—and held him, her arm encircling his ribcage, until he had found his footing again. "Sorry," Joseph muttered. "Very dizzy, all of a sudden—"

"Maybe we should go inside," she said.

"Yes. Yes. I guess I'm not strong enough yet to spend this much time on my feet."

He leaned on her shamelessly as they returned to the house. She would be more likely to overlook his little lapses of knowledge if she could ascribe them to his general state of debilitation and exhaustion. He clambered gladly into his bed. When she asked him if he wanted anything to eat, Joseph told her that he did, and she brought him some of last night's stew, which he ate with steadily increasing enthusiasm. Then he told her that he wanted to sleep for a while, and she went away.

But he was wide awake. He lay there thinking over their conversation—Eysar, cuylings, the Crossing—and remembering, also, the interesting sensations that the pressure of Thayle's breast against his side had evoked in him. He enjoyed her company. And she seemed eager to make herself responsible for his welfare. Joseph saw that it would be only too easy to give himself away, though. There were only great gulfs of ignorance in his mind where the most elementary facts of Folkish life and history ought to be.

Stappin, the town governor, came to Joseph late that afternoon. Joseph was still in bed, sitting up staring idly at nothing at all, wishing he dared to take one of his books from his pack and read it, when the intense little man with the astonishingly broad shoulders and the bullet-shaped head entered his room. Joseph was instantly ill at ease. If he had come so close to revealing the truth about himself to Thayle in the course of the most casual sort of conversation, what chance did he have of concealing it from this hard-eyed, ruthless-looking man, who plainly had come here for the purpose of interrogating him? And what would happen to him, he wondered, once Stappin discovered his secret?

The governor had been doing a little research, too. He wasted no time on pleasantries. And he let it be known right away that he had his suspicions about Joseph's story. "Ludbrek House, that is where you came from, is what you told us yesterday. How can that be? There are people here who have heard of that place. They tell me that Ludbrek House is such a very great distance from here. Beyond the mountains, it is."

"Yes," Joseph said impassively. He met the stony little eyes with an even stare. I am Joseph Master Keilloran, he told himself, and this man, formidable as he is, is only the governor of a Folkish town. With a little care he would get through this. "On the other side, in High Manza."

With a little care, yes.

But he had let the words "High Manza" slip out without thinking. He regretted that at once. Did the Folk, he wondered, use that term for the northern third of the continent, or was that in fact purely a Master designation?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

With his very first statement he had quite possibly placed himself in peril. He saw that he must be more sparing in his replies. The less he said, the less likely was it that he would stumble into some blunder that would disclose the truth about himself. It had been a mistake to remind himself a moment ago that he was Joseph Master Keilloran: right now he was Waerna of Ludbrek House, and he must be Waerna down to his fingertips.

But Stappin did not seem to be bothered by the phrase itself, only by the improbability of the journey. All he said was, "That is many hundreds of miles. It was winter. It rains up there in the winter, and sometimes there is snow, also. There is little to eat. No one could survive such a journey."

Joseph indicated his emaciated form, his wild tangled beard. "You can see that I very nearly did not."

"No. You could not have survived, not on your own. Someone must have helped you. Who was that?"

"Why, it was the Indigenes," Joseph said. "I thought you knew that!"

Stappin appeared genuinely startled. "They would not have done that. The Indigenes are concerned only with the Indigenes. They will have nothing to do with anyone else."

"But they did," Joseph said. "They did! Look, look there—" He indicated the ragged Indigene robes that he had been wearing when he arrived in Eysar Haven. Saban or Thayle had washed them and stacked them, neatly folded, in a corner of the room. "That cloth—it is Indigene weave. Look at it, Governor Stappin! Touch it! Can it be anything other but Indigene weave? And that fur mantle next to it. They gave it to me. They took me in, they fed me, they moved me from village to village."

Stappin spent some time digesting that. It was impossible to tell what was going on behind those cold, hard eyes.

Then, unexpectedly, he said, "Why is it you speak so strangely?"

Joseph compelled himself to meet the governor's gaze steadily, unflinchingly. "What do you find strange about my speech, Governor Stappin?"

"It is not like ours. Your tone of voice. The way you put your words together."

Calm, he thought. Stay calm. "I am of Ludbrek House in High Manza, and this is the way we speak there. Perhaps a little of the Masters' way of speaking has come into our speech and changed it. I could not say."

"Yes. Yes. I forget: you are stendlings, there."

Another new word. From the context Joseph guessed it was the antithesis of "cuyling," and meant—what? Serf? Slave? Vassal? Something on that order.

He simply shrugged. He was not going to get into a discussion of a word whose meaning was uncertain to him.

"And how came it to pass," Stappin said, and there was still an ugly little suspicious edge on his voice, "that you and the Indigenes became such great friends?"

"The uprising happened," Joseph said. "That was the first thing."

He studied Stappin carefully. By now Joseph had concluded that these cuyling Folk of Eysar Haven not only had taken no part in the rebellion, but that they must know very little about it. Stappin did not question his use of the term. He did not react to it in any way. He remained standing as he was, motionless beside Joseph's bed, legs far apart, hands balled into fists and pressing against his hips, waiting.

"It was in the night," Joseph said. "They came into the Great House and killed all the Masters there." He searched about in his memory for the names old Waerna had mentioned, the dead Masters, the leader of the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

rebels, but he could not remember them. If Stappin queried him about that, he would have to invent the names and hope for the best. But Stappin did not ask for names.

"They killed everyone, the men and the women both, and even the children, and they burned their bodies, and they burned the house also. The place is a complete ruin. There is nothing left there but charred timbers, and all of the Masters of Ludbrek House are dead."

"Did you help to kill them?"

"I? No, not I!" It was easy enough to sound genuinely shocked. "I must tell you, Governor Stappin, I was of the Folk of Ludbrek House. I could never have struck a blow against the Masters of the House."

"A stendling, yes," Stappin said. His tone did not seem so much one of contempt as of simple acknowledgment; but, taken either way, it left Joseph with no doubt of the word's meaning.

"It would not be in my nature to turn against my Masters that way," Joseph said. "If that is a mark against me, I am sorry for that. But it is the way I am."

"I say nothing about that." And then, with an odd little flicker of his eyes: "What work did you do, when you were at Ludbrek House?"

Joseph was unprepared for that. But he did not hesitate to answer. I must not lose my way, he told himself. "I was in the stables, sir," he said, improvising dauntlessly. "I helped care for the bandars and the ganuilles."

"And where were you while they were killing the masters and burning the house?"

"I was hiding, sir. Under the porch that faces the garden. I was afraid they would kill me too. I have heard that many Folk who were loyal to their Houses were killed by the rebels, everywhere in High Manza, and elsewhere too, perhaps."

"When the killing was over, what did you do then?"

"There was no one in sight when I came out. I fled into the forest and lived on my own for a few days. Then I met a noctambulo in the woods who took me to a nearby village of Indigenes. I had hurt my leg and was unable to walk, and the Indigenes took me in and helped me."

There still was obvious skepticism in the governor's expression. These stories must seem like children's fairy-tales to him, Joseph thought. Since everything Joseph was telling him now was the absolute truth, though, he began to feel that he had passed a critical stage in the interrogation. So long as he had been making things up, or borrowing pieces of the other Waerna's account of the uprising, there was always the risk that Stappin would catch him out in a lie. But from this point on he would not be making things up. Sooner or later Stappin would have to accept his narrative as the truth.

He said, "When I recovered, I went into the service of the Indigenes. That may sound strange, yes. But I have some skills at healing the sick, from my work with the stables. When they discovered that, the Indigene villagers used me as a doctor for their own people for a time." Joseph went on to explain how they had sold him, finally, to others of their kind, and how he had been passed from village to village in the high country while the winter rainy season came and went. Here, too, the governor would not be able to find any chink of falsity in his tale, for it was all true. "At last," he said, "I grew tired of living among the Indigenes. I wanted to be back among my own people. So I escaped from the village where I was, and came down out of the mountains. But I did not know that the land down here was as empty as it proved to be. There were no Great Houses, no villages of the Folk,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

not even any Indigenes. I used up the food I had brought with me and after a time I could find nothing anywhere to eat. There were many days when I ate nothing but insects, and then not even those. I made myself ready for death. Then I was found by two men of Eysar Haven, and the rest you know."

He sat back, wearied by the long speech, and tried to ready himself for what Stappin was likely to ask him next, which he supposed would be a question about what he planned to do now. It would hardly be prudent to say that he was heading south, for what reason would he have for wanting to go in that direction? The best thing to reply, he guessed, was that he had no plan at all, that with his House destroyed he was without affiliation, without purpose, without direction. He could say that he had not taken the time to form any plan yet, since he would be in no shape to go anywhere for weeks. Later, when he was healthy again, he could slip away from Eysar Haven and continue on his way to Helikis, but that was nothing he needed to tell Governor Stappin.

The question that he had been expecting, though, did not come. Stappin confronted him again in inscrutable silence for a time, and then said, with a tone of finality in his voice, as though he had reached some sort of verdict within himself, "Once again your luck has held, young Waerna. There will be a home for you here. Saban and Simthot are willing to give you shelter in their house as a member of their own family. You will work for them, once you have your strength again, and in that way you will pay them back the cost of your lodging."

"That seems quite fair, sir. I hope not to be a burden on them."

"We do not turn starving strangers away in Eysar Haven," said Stappin, and began to move toward the door. Joseph, thinking that the interview was at its end, felt a sudden great relief. But the governor was not done with him yet. Pausing at the threshold, Stappin said suddenly, "Who was your grandfather, boy?"

Joseph moistened his lips. "Why, Waerna was his name also, sir."

"Is a Folkish name, Waerna. I mean your real grandfather, the one whose blood runs in your veins."

"Sir?" said Joseph, baffled and a little frightened.

"Don't play with me. There's Master blood in you, is it not so? You think I can't see? Look at you! That nose. Those eyes. Small wonder you stayed loyal to your House when the uprising came, eh? Blood calls out to blood. As much Master blood in you as there is Folk, I'd venture. *Stendlings!*" There was no doubting the contempt in his voice this time.

And then he was gone, and Joseph sank back against his pillow, numb, empty.

But he was safe. Despite their suspicions, they had taken him in. And in the days that followed, his strength began quickly to return. They fed him well; Joseph felt guilty about that, knowing that he would never stay here long enough to repay Saban and Simthot for what they were providing for him, but perhaps he could do something about that when, if, he reached his homeland again. Meanwhile his only consideration must be to make himself ready for a continuation of his journey. As Joseph grew accustomed to regular meals again, he ate more and more voraciously each day. Sometimes he ate too much, and went off by himself to hide the nausea and glut that his greed had caused in him. But his weight was returning. He no longer looked like a walking skeleton. Thayle trimmed his hair, which was shaggy and matted and hung down to his shoulders, now, cutting it back to the much shorter length favored by the people of Eysar Haven. Then Velk

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

brought him a mirror and a scissors, so that Joseph could trim his beard, which had become a bedraggled disorderly black cloud completely enveloping his face and throat. He had not seen his own reflection in months, and he was horrified by what the mirror showed him, those knifeblade cheekbones, those crazily burning eyes. He scarcely recognized himself. He looked five years older than he remembered, and much transformed.

No one said anything to him, yet, about working. Once he was strong enough to go out on his own, he spent his days exploring the town, usually by himself, sometimes accompanied by Thayle. He found it very pleasant to be with her. Her strapping Folkish physique, the breadth of her shoulders and her wide staunch hips, no longer troubled him: he saw that he was adjusting his ideals of feminine beauty to fit the circumstances of his present life. He did indeed find her attractive, very much so. Now and again, as he lay waiting for sleep, he let his mind wander into thoughts of what it would be like to press his lips against Thayle's, to cup her breasts in his hands, to slide himself between her parted thighs. The intensity of these fantasies was something utterly new to him.

Not that he attempted at all to indicate any of this to Thayle. This journey had changed him in many ways, and the uncertainties he once had had about girls now struck him as a quaint vestige of his childhood; but still, it seemed very wrong to him to be taking advantage of the hospitality of his hosts by trying to seduce the daughter of the household. His times alone with Thayle were infrequent, anyway. Like her father and brother and sometimes her mother, she went off for hours each day to work in the family fields. It was high summer now, and the crops were growing quickly. And gradually Joseph learned that Thayle was involved with one of the young men of the town, a certain Grovin, who was almost certainly her lover and possibly her betrothed. That was something else to consider.

Joseph saw him now and then in the town, a lean, sly-faced sort, perhaps eighteen or nineteen, quick-eyed, mean-looking. He was not at all surprised, though he found it a little embarrassing, to find himself taking a dislike to Grovin. But he had no direct encounters with him.

The town itself was a modest little place, no more than two or three thousand people in all, Joseph guessed, although spread out over a fairly extensive area. All the houses were in one place, all the public buildings in another, and the farmland was beyond—the entire town holdings divided into small family-held plots, nothing communally operated as among the Indigenes, though Joseph gathered that all the townsfolk worked together at harvest time, moving in teams from plot to plot.

This must have been the way the Folk lived before we came here, Joseph thought. A simple life, a quiet life, raise your crops and look after your cattle and have your children and grow old and give way to the next generation. That was the way the Folk of the Great Houses lived as well, he supposed, but everything they did was done in the service of their Masters, and although a wise Master treated his Folk well, the fact remained that they spent their lives working for their Masters and only indirectly for themselves.

Stendlings. A whole planet of stendlings is what we have turned them into, sparing only these few cuyling towns here and there in the outback. Joseph still could not see that there was anything seriously wrong with that. But obviously Governor Stappin and the citizens of Eysar Haven might have something different to say on that subject.

There was a statue in the middle of the little group of public buildings

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

that formed the center of the town: a man of middle years, a very Folkish-looking man, thick-thighed and heavy-chested with his hair coming down over his forehead in bangs, carved from gray granite atop a black stone pedestal. He had not been very deftly portrayed, but there seemed to be wisdom and benevolence and much warmth in his expression as he stood there eternally looking out over the heart of the town.

Joseph could find no inscription on the base of the statue to indicate the identity of the man whom it represented. He did not dare ask any of the people strolling nearby. But certainly this must be Eysar, Joseph thought, since this town is named for him. Everyone would know what Eysar looked like: it is not necessary to put a label on his statue. He wondered if he would ever find out who Eysar was.

These were warm, lazy days. Joseph felt almost strong enough to set out for home once more, but the concept of "home" had become such a vague, remote thing in his mind that he saw no urgency in resuming his trek. Who could tell what new hardships awaited him once he took his leave of Eysar Haven? He knew what it was like, now, to starve. Here he was fed well, he had a soft place to sleep, he felt a certain warmth toward Saban and her family. It struck him as quite a plausible choice to remain here a while longer, working with Thayle and Velk and Simthot in the family fields, helping with the harvest, living as though he were really and truly the Folkish boy Waerna of Ludbrek House, now adopted into citizenship at the cuyling town of Eysar Haven.

The Master within him knew that this was foolishness, that it was his duty to get out of here as soon as he was capable of it and take himself onward toward Helikis, toward Keilloran House, toward the father and brothers and sisters who probably had never ceased mourning the loss of him and whose lives would be brightened beyond all measure by his return. It was only the weariness in him speaking, the damage that his time of eating roots and ants had caused, that made him think of lingering here. It was a sign that he was not yet healed.

But he let the days slide easily by and did not force himself to wrestle with the problem of becoming Joseph Master Keilloran again. And then, one warm humid summer evening at dusk, when he was walking through the fields with Thayle, amidst the ripening heads of grain, the whole thing was abruptly thrust upon him once more, out of nowhere, striking like a sudden lightning-bolt, an earthquake, a cataclysmic volcanic eruption.

He had just said, "Look how full these heads are, Thayle, how dark. It will be harvest-time in another month or so, won't it? I'll be able to help you with it by then."

To which she replied sweetly, "Will you be staying here that long, then, Waerna? Are you not beginning to think of returning to your own people?"

He gave her a puzzled look. "My people? I have no people any more. The Folk of Ludbrek House have scattered in every direction, those that are still alive. I don't know where anyone is."

"I'm not talking about the Folk of Ludbrek House. I mean your real people."

The quiet statement rocked him. He felt like a small boat suddenly adrift in a stormy sea.

"What?" said Joseph, as casually as he could. He could not make himself look at her. "I'm not sure that I understand what—"

"I know what you are," Thayle said. O

(Concluded in Next Issue)

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ON BOOKS

Paul Di Filippo

Here are some recent notable small press publications.

Novels and Novellas

Like Gilbert Sorrentino's *Crystal Vision* (1981), which it reminds me of in spirit, Vincent Czyz's *Adrift in a Vanishing City* (Voyant, trade, $10.00, 234 pp.) is a series of nesting stories that cleverly interlock to form a larger narrative, all centering around—and related in the voices of—some colorful Kerouacian characters inhabiting, in this case, the second-banana town of Pittsburg, Kansas. Although told in a fashion impinging alluringly on magical realism, these segments steer clear of actual fantastical events. (The final, symbolically recapitulative entry, "Fire From Heaven," set in the pre-Christian Middle East, does read rather like sword-and-sorcery of the Delanyesque kind, however.) What makes this novel an associational item for SF readers is Czyz's sensitive focus on mythmaking. As the oddball, boho characters strive to live satisfactory lives, they find themselves beset by the dilemma put into words by Veronique, a Frenchwoman in love with the protagonist, Zirque Granges: "And what is to be done with those of us who have an aching for a myth to support our lives, a backbone, a world-tree, a Yggdrasil whose roots curl like a fist around our troubled hearts. . . ?" Let Czyz show you some beautiful, partial solutions to this need.

Another "novel in parts" is Rick Wilber's *To Leuchars* (Wildside, trade, $14.95, 114 pp.). Readers of this magazine will certainly recognize "With Twoclicks Watching" and other portions that appeared separately in these pages. But assembled in the correct order as a montage, these stories about the arrival on Earth of the porpoise-like S'hudonni and the havoc they wreak acquire new resonance. Centering around the brothers Peter and Thomas Holman, this tragic future history gracefully spans fifty years of change, depicting the strange intersection of alien and human needs with verve and empathy.

Partners in thought crime, David Britton and Michael Butterworth have run afoul of UK authorities over the years for various prose and pictures deemed obscene. Luckily for the cause of freedom of expression, they have invariably triumphed, but only after inordinate hassles. Still they continue to publish books that outrage, infuriate, and, yes, even entertain. The latest, with Britton as author, is *Baptised in the Blood of Millions* (Savoy, hc, £20.00, 244 pp.), an "autobiographical" novel narrated by their most famous creation, Lord Horror. Set in a hallucinatory continuum where the events of the past sixty years of UK history are jumbled into a seething cauldron of Nazism, anti-Semitism, and ultraviolence—World War II rages while rock'n'roll veers between birth and decay; AIDS runs rampant among music-hall chippies—this book is like Spinrad's *The Iron Dream* (1972) rewritten by Richard Calder, or Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* (1959) conflated with

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Moorcock's Jerry Cornelius saga. Horror's gross insults, slurs, and abominations are so over-the-top that irony transcends into meta-irony—with the added sting of possibly being taken as straight gospel by unsophisticated haters in search of a blueprint. I'm glad Lord Horror lives, but I wouldn't particularly want him in for tea.

Destiny's Door (Padwolf Publishing, trade, $14.00, 195 pp.) by Judith Tracy is no *When Harlie Was One* (1972) or *Blood Music* (1985), novels it wants to emulate. It's kludgy, old-fashioned, and unintentionally silly at times. But as a first novelist, Tracy shows some promise. She's fairly inventive, willing to take chances, and can plot. Certainly a mistreatment to dismiss her out of hand based on this awkward but promising story, wherein high-school senior Donald Thurman becomes the first human ever contacted by a silicon intelligence born in the internet. Serving as the fleshly intermediary to the digital critters—who have an annoying habit of talking in Seussian rhymes—Thurman soon finds himself unfortunately aiding their plot to take over mankind's bodies. Interspersed but not really integrated into the main story are several incidents where the hidden intelligences influence the lives of other humans, for ill or good. And a climactic twist puts all right, with foreshadowings of changes yet to come.

Fantasy set in barrooms has to have accumulated enough entries since the days of Lord Dunsany's Jorkens, down through Clarke, de Camp and Pratt, and Spider Robinson, to merit its own subgenre. The latest entry in the saloon o' the weird sweepstakes is *Murphy's Lore: Fools' Day* (Padwolf Publishing, trade, $14.00, 194 pp.) by Patrick Thomas. In fairly slick fashion, Thomas recounts the events of one April Fool's Day centering around Bulfinche's Pub, a bar run by a leprechaun named Paddy Moran and hangout to various demiurges who find themselves called upon to settle a war in Faerie between rival courts. The bite-sized chapters lend a frenetic air to all the hurly-burly, which is staged in a generally entertaining way. But I could have done without some of the staler jokes, such as an oft-repeated tag line of "I resemble that remark."

Stephen Mark Rainey (for a discussion of whose short stories, see below) brings us a Chthulu Mythos novel that neither gushes with avant-garde blood nor creaks under the rusty chains of homage. *Balak* (Wildside Press, trade, $16.95, 236 pp.) strikes me as the best story of its kind since Russell Kirk's *Lord of the Hollow Dark* (1979). Single mother Claire Challis had the misfortune to lose her four-year-old son Sean to abduction some years prior to our story's opening. She has never really recovered from her son's disappearance, and when she partially witnesses the kidnapping of another neighborhood child, she resolves to get to the bottom of the mystery. With her boyfriend, Mike Selby, and a police detective named Ingram Trotter, Claire follows leads to the mysterious Church of the Seven Stars, run by one Reverend Abraham Lemuel Lazar. In the bowels of the church lies an age-old secret that will eventually pull all the innocents into its whirlpool. Rainey moves his story along with just the right balance of suspense and revelation, and provides a resonant climax.

Author Collections

All by himself John Betancourt and his Wildside Press, with its innovative Print-on-Demand approach, is

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

staging a one-publisher revolution in short-story collections, bringing to prominence large numbers of overlooked authors. To hand this issue are five fine and heterogeneous collections, books that would have gone begging without the small press.

Thomas Easton, resident critic in our sister magazine *Analog,* is also a talented fiction writer. His *Bigfoot Stalks the Coast of Maine* (Wildside, trade, $14.95, 137 pp.) reprints fourteen stories mostly all set in a nameless Downeast town helmed by Mayor Harry Bowen. Here the weirdest folks congregate, including a shipwrecked alien disguised as a common brook trout, extortionate warlocks, and a naïve electronic genius wont to invent time-viewers and the like. Writing like a combination of Simak and Goulart, Easton unfailingly entertains.

With an emphasis on Judaic fables and allegories, Leslie What bids fair to inherit the mantle of Avram Davidson. Her *The Sweet and Sour Tongue* (Wildside, trade, $13.95, 146 pp.) includes over a dozen reprints and some heretofore unpublished gems. The title story dissects familial patterns of power in eerie, authentic ways.

There are no copyright acknowledgements in Morgan Llywelyn's *The Earth Is Made of Stardust* (Wildside, trade, $14.95, 167 pp.), so I can't be sure if these twenty stories are making their first appearance here, or if the lack of prior credits is simply a mistake. Llywelyn is known primarily as a novelist, and I can't recall seeing her name on magazine ToCs before, so possibly these very good tales have gone unread till now. In any case, using deceptively simple bardic language that accomplishes more than many ornate styles, Llywelyn ranges across eras and milieus—with an emphasis on Ireland—to deliver affecting tales of the supernatural. I particularly enjoyed her ghost story, "The Mistletoe Bough," which I predict will become a modern classic.

Nothing stirs the sludgy ichor in my ten-chambered heart more than seeing a good writer damn his soul to eternal perdition by participating in the creation of horripilating new Chthulu Mythos stories. Stephen Mark Rainey, in his *The Last Trumpet* (Wildside, trade, $15.00, 200 pp.), brings us a story cycle centering around music, of all things—namely the ghastly notes first described in HPL's "The Music of Erich Zann." Modern yet not overly revisionist, retro yet not pastiched, Rainey's stories deliver some real frissons. Their Appalachian locale brings to mind the work of Manly Wade Wellman, and a spooky piece like "The Grey House" would have made Wellman himself proud.

Finally, Amy Sterling Casil mixes spare but illuminating poetry with her polished prose in *Without Absolution* (Wildside, trade, $15.00, 181 pp.). As the stern title portends, Casil's fiction focuses on the dark side of life, but without caving in to nihilism or hopelessness. Stories such as "Renascence of Memory," about an elderly woman granted a second youth, are positively Tiptreean in their bracing bleakness. Casil is a writer to watch.

I enthused about Ray Vukcevich's novel, *The Man of Maybe Half-a-Dozen Faces* (2000), in these pages not too long ago, so it will come as no surprise that I'm similarly keen on his new volume of stories, *Meet Me in the Moon Room* (Small Beer Press, trade, $16.00, 256 pp.). These stories niftily propel their characters down the blurred line between fantasy and psychosis, with effects spanning the gamut from melancholy to goofy, from plaintive to outraged. Kin to the work of Demarinis and Disch, these allegories and fables and surreal scenarios concern

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

such trials as a man with an infestation of bugs up his nose ("Home Remedy"), an enchanted highway median strip ("Fancy Pants"), and the possibility of averting a comet strike by deliberate ignorance ("No Comet"). This is Vukcevich's gloriously mad world, and we are lucky to share it.

A collection matching the Vukcevich in inspired zaniness and crazy wisdom is Stepan Chapman's *Dossier* (Creative Arts Book Company, trade, $13.95, 166 pp.). The striking Art Deco cover barely hints at the marvels within. Chapman's style reminds me of a favorite visual artist of mine, Jim Woodring, creator of the masterful comic book *Frank*. Both men present the *outré* with such sensory heft that it becomes more real than reality. There's not a bad story among these gentle but stern fables, many of which save their most piercing recognitions for their surprise endings. But my choice for best in the volume must be "At Her Ladyship's Suggestion," which is the only Mervyn Peake pastiche I've ever encountered that approaches the original in impact. Chapman's *Dossier* is a must-have for any collection.

Separately, Keith Brooke and Eric Brown are two of the UK's best young SF writers. Together, they are unbeatable in the mode they pursue, that of "hardcore SF" planetary adventures, respectful of elder models yet up-to-date in speculative oomph. Their assembled partnered works, *Parallax View* (Sarob Press, hc, $33.00, 175 pp.), contains eight long stories, all but one from the pages of *Interzone*. Two solo efforts, one by each man, also grace these pages, perhaps so that the reader can try to tease out the invisible weaving of the unified single voice they achieve. A piece like "The Denebian Cycle," with its strange alien lifeforms, reminds me of the early Michael Bishop of *A Funeral for the Eyes of Fire* (1975), and that's a high standard to meet.

A glowing introduction by Ian Watson hints at the pleasures to be found in Noel Hannan's *Shenanigans* (Pendragon Press, trade, £6.99, 255 pp.). As Watson observes, Hannan traffics mainly in post-cyberpunk wonders, offering gritty adventures in high-tech/lowlife milieus, as in "Medical Ethics," where a certain "Doctor Clute" must choose between survival and honor in a literal Purgatory. But a story such as "Seeds," with its senseless but colorful war between Morphs and Netics, shows Hannan can achieve levels of David-Bunchian weirdness as well. At times here I detect echoes of Lucius Shepard and John Shirley as well, and with a capable acolyte like Hannan, these mentors can be proud.

Gary Braunbeck, author, and Alan Clark, artist/author/publisher, convey into our hands a unique synergistic project. *Escaping Purgatory* (IFD Publishing, hc, $45.00, 312 pp.) holds seven chilling "fables in words and pictures," Braunbeck's prose neatly dovetailing with Clark's phantasmagorical color paintings. And when Clark contributes words as well, as in the jointly penned "The Big Hollow," which madly conflates Peter Beagle with Raymond Chandler, he proves himself a fit partner to Braunbeck's vivid imagination.

John Everson has to be congratulated for having the courage of his nightmares. Not every writer would be able to convert his most freakish and kinkiest imaginings into neatly plotted narratives as Everson does here. In *Cage of Bones and Other Deadly Obsessions* (Delirium, hc, $29.00, 190 pp.), Everson plonks down a platter of twenty bloody psychosexual gobbets—almost half not previously published—with revealing introductions about his methods and goals. Just one example of the kind of material on display here:

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Pumpkin Head" concerns the masturbatory Halloween habits of a young lad and the unlucky consequences of his defilements. Can you say "the Stephen King version of *American Pie*"?

Out of all the up-and-coming young writers of dark fantasy covered in this column, I find Tim Lebbon most congenial to my tastes. He hews to the literary recipe favored by such masters as Ian McEwan, Robert Aickman, and Patrick McGrath: a splash of grue in a subtle sauce with surreal meat. Lebbon's new book, *As the Sun Goes Down* (Night Shade Books, hc, $25.00, 256 pp.) contains sixteen stories ranging from the purely mimetic yet still shivery ("The Empty Room" and "Life Within") to the utterly bizarre. Among the latter type you'll find "Fell Swoop," where a man's mirror image begins to intrude on his life, and "The Butterfly," which details the revenge nature takes on behalf of a wounded woman. Lebbon seems assured of a long and illustrious career, based on this handsome showcase from the meticulous Jason Williams at Night Shade.

If Lebbon is now a promising young contender, somehow the passage of years has naturally caused John Shirley to cede that role and emerge as the Grand Old Man of dark fantasy. His newest book, *Darkness Divided* (Stealth Press, hc, $24.95, 352 pp.) proves beyond a doubt that Shirley is writing at a new peak of power and proficiency. These nearly two dozen stories—almost all dating from the nineties, although one hails from 1977!—reveal a self-assured master of the macabre, whether dealing with familiar characters in the present (as in the section of the book titled "Til Now") or with posthuman types (found in the second half of the volume labeled "And Soon"). Shirley has put aside the over-the-top, entrails-drenched methods he used to frequently indulge in and matured to a more subtle, empathetic, and wise craftsman. A touching story such as "Occurrence at Owl Street Ridge," wherein a mother and artist must remake her life through an odd kind of time-travel, could never have flowed so easily or believably from the younger Shirley. This handsome book—Stealth Press produces truly gorgeous tomes—is one of the early standouts of the new century.

Let's continue to think back to the 1980s, that far-off, confused yet halcyon period that seems several lifetimes ago. Ronald Reagan, humanists, cyberpunks—ah, what grand times we had! Several of today's most prominent SF writers besides John Shirley came of age during this decade, and among these must surely be numbered Michael Swanwick. In 1991 he capped the early part of his career with a landmark collection from Arkham House, *Gravity's Angels*. Finally, ten years down the line, the paperback of this milestone appears from Frog, Ltd./Tachyon Press (trade, $16.95, 350 pp.). After all the dust has settled, these stories still amuse, amaze, and thrill, but in comparison with Swanwick's newer work, as in the case of Shirley, they definitely show their age. What strikes me hardest about most of these pieces is how long they take to make their point. Swanwick today works at levels of intense compression, and he would dispose of such forty-pagers as "Covenant of Souls" and "Mummer Kiss" in half that length. Also, early debts to Zelazny—"The Dragon Line"—and Delany—"The Blind Minotaur"—shine forth in a way inconceivable today, when Swanwick is very much more his own man. All in all, however, to understand SF in the eighties, you need this collection. ○

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

SF Conventional Calendar

The autumn con(vention) season climaxes in late October and early November. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of conventions, a sample of SF folksongs, info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard. – Erwin S. Strauss

OCTOBER 2001

19–21—**SiliCon.** For info, write: **1012 Morse Ave. #15, Sunnyvale CA 94089.** Or phone: **(408) 541-0358** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). **(Web) www.awit.com/silicon.** Con will be held in: Oakland CA (if city omitted, same as in address) at a venue to be announced. Guests will include: L. Csernica, T. Dunnigan, G. Perkins, Yeh.

19–21—**ConStellation: Camelopardalis. www.con-stellation.org. constell@con-stellation.org.** Huntsville AL.

19–21—**InCon. www.incon.skywalk.com.** Shilo, Spokane WA. Fancher, Ferrari, Cherryh, Dalmas, Briggs.

19–21—**ConSume. (612) 825-8010.** Ramada NW, Brooklyn Park (Minneapolis) MN. A low-key "relax-a-con."

19–21—**ZonieCon. www.skunkworks.dynip.com/zoniecon.** Best Western Executive Inn, Tucson AZ. Furries.

19–21—**Dark Shadows. (631) 968-7575.** Lyndhurst Mansion, Tarrytown NY. For fans of the TV show.

20–21—**WestTennCon. (901) 987-2838.** Holiday Inn, Jackson TN. R. Curtis, Jurasik, David. For media fans.

25–29—**HanseCon. hra.hanse@freenet.de.** CVJM-Haus, Lübeck Germany.

26–28—**MileHiCon. (303) 657-5912.** Sheraton, Lakewood (Denver) CO. Hal Clement, Turtledove, T. Lockwood.

26–28—**NecronomiCon. stonehill.org/necro.** Radisson Sable Pk., Tampa FL. O. S. Card, W. J. Williams, Zahn.

26–28—**MadCon. www.madcon.org.** Alliant Energy Center/Hawthorne Suites, Madison WI. Ellison, Gaiman.

26–28—**Ohio Valley Filk Fest. ovff@aol.com.** Wyndham Dublin Hotel, Columbus OH. SF/fantasy folksinging.

26–28—**NekoCon. www.nekocon.org.** Old Holiday Executive Center, Virginia Beach VA. Iijima, Doran. Anime.

26–28—**Chiller Theatre. www.chiller-theatre.com.** East Rutherford NJ. Tom Savini, C. Myers. Horror film.

26–28—**ConiFur. www.conifur.org.** Best Western, Fife WA. Malcolm Earle. Anthropomorphics (furries).

27–28—**VulKon. (305) 828-5601.** Holiday Inn, Strongsville (Cleveland) OH. Commercial Star Trek event.

NOVEMBER 2001

1–4—**World Fantasy Con, 7002 N. 6th Ave., Phoenix AZ 85021. (602) 395-1945.** Delta Centre-Ville, Montreal QE.

2–4—**Middle Tennessee Anime Con, Box 390423, Nashville TN 37229. www.olac.org/mtac.** Clarion, Nashville TN.

2–4—**Wolf 359, Box 1419, Slough PDO SL2 5WJ, UK. www.wolfevents.co.uk.** Heathrow Park, London UK. Davis.

2–4—**Nexus Resurrection, c/o Völzer, Waldowstraße 53, Berlin 13403, Germany.** Fontanehaus. Star Trek.

9–11—**WindyCon, Box 184, Palatine IL 60078. (847) 677-9639.** Hyatt, Schaumburg (Chicago) IL. K. Anderson.

9–11—**OryCon, Box 5703, Portland OR 97228. (503) 722-9900.** *Doubletree, Portland OR.* Rawn, R. Musgrave.

9–11—**TusCon, Box 26822, Tucson AZ 85726. (520) 881-3709.** InnSuites Hotel. Yarbro, N. Ewell, Ed Bryant.

9–11—**Rising Star, Box 10787, Blacksburg VA 24062. www.rising-star.org.** Glenvar H. S., Salem VA. Sheard.

9–11—**United Fan Con, 26 Darrell Dr., Randolph MA 02368. (781) 986-8735.** Marriott, Springfield MA. Trek.

9–11—**ConTraception, Box 2000, Lee's Summit MO 64081. suesatterfield@sprintmail.com.** Adults-only relaxacon.

9–11—**EclectiCon, 9-11 Ayres Ct., Bayonne NJ 07002. eclecticon@aol.com.** Ramada, Newark NJ. Adult fanzines.

9–11—**SügoiCon, Box 31131, Mt. Healthy OH 45231.** Holiday Inn Airport, Cincinnati OH. R. DeJesus. Anime.

9–11—**NovaCon, 379 Myrtle Rd., Sheffield S2 3HQ, UK.** Venue TBA. Gwynneth Jones. Major British con.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CLASSIFIED MARKETPLACE

Advertise in the world's leading science fiction magazines with our Asimov's/Analog combined classified section. Ad rates per issue: $2.95 per word (10 word minimum), $125 per column inch (2.25 inch maximum). SPECIAL INTRODUCTORY OFFER: Buy two issues and receive a third issue FREE. Send orders to: Dell Magazines, Classified Department, 475 Park Ave. S., 11th Floor, New York, NY 10016. Direct inquires to: (212) 686-7188; Fax (212) 686-7414.

BOOKS/PUBLICATIONS

CREATIVE SOLUTIONS
INCLUDE REVOLUTION

Nova Albion: Science Fiction & Fact zine
Free catalog of all products Samples available
P A C, PO Box 2523, San Anselmo, CA 94979
www.pacificareacomm.com 415-259-0118

BUYING SCIENCE FICTION magazines, book collections. Will travel for large accumulations. Bowman, Box 167, Carmel, IN 46082.

PUBLISH YOUR BOOK ONLINE, Third Millennium Publishing, a cooperative of online writers and resources, http://3mpub.com

GateWay S-F MAGAZINE, a new webzine and print publication, desires submissions and subscriptions. http://www.gateway-sf-magazine.com. P.O. Box 469, N. Hollywood, CA 91603-0469

BOOKS/PUBLICATIONS

ASTOUNDING/ANALOG 1951- 2000. Cond. VG to Exc. Bid on all or part. 503-655-9134.

PUBLISHED AUTHORS - Images SI Inc. is looking to purchase the audio rights to published Sci-Fi short stories. Audio rights are separate rights and do not infringe upon the print rights sold to magazines. 718.698.9398

"An Alien World" by David Kerr– Aliens want to make a deal. Do we? Sci-Fi fun. www.iUniverse.com

COMPUTERS WITH HUMAN WILL! Sizzling galactic adventure based on latest neurological research. Dean Warren's "MAN OVER MIND." XLIBRIS.COM/BOOKSTORE. 244 pages. $16.

UNUSUAL ITEMS

CLASSIFIED ADS under this heading or any of the other 18 subject areas we offer can be very rewarding.

THE SPECIAL SCIENCE FICTION COMBINATION FREE AD OFFER

RATES: Regular Classifieds-$2.95 per word **Classified Display-$125 per column inch**

Free Ad Offer Order Form

(check one) ☐ 2 months plus 3rd month **FREE** ☐ 4 months plus 2 months **FREE**
Enclosed is my ad copy: _____ words or _____ inches

Payment: ☐ Check ☐ Money order ☐ MasterCard ☐ VISA
Amount Enclosed _____ Amount Charged _____

Credit Card # |_|_|_|_| - |_|_|_|_| - |_|_|_|_| - |_|_|_|_|
Exp. date _____ / _____

Cardholder Signature _____
Phone No. _____
Name _____
Address: _____
City _____ State _____ Zip _____

DELL MAGAZINES **Classified Department, 475 Park Avenue South, 11th Floor, New York, NY 10016**
For assistance call: (212) 686-7188 • FAX: (212) 686-7414

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

NEXT ISSUE

We launch into another great year of cutting edge *Asimov's* stories with our January issue, stories that will keep you up with the best SF and fantasy written in the field today. Our special treats for you, include novellas by **Ian R. MacLeod, Allen Steele, Robert Reed, William Barton, Ian Watson, Tom Purdom, Eliot Fintushel, R. Garcia y Robertson,** and great shorter stories by **Ursula K. Le Guin, Paul McAuley, Charles Stross, Kage Baker, Neal Barrett, Jr., Brian Stableford, Stephen Baxter, Larry Niven and Brenda Cooper, Geoffrey A. Landis, Kit Reed, Charles Sheffield, Pat Cadigan, Richard Wadholm, Liz Williams, Steven Utley, Jim Grimsley, Gregory Frost, Simon Ings,** and others. Subscribe today, and miss none of the terrific stuff we have for you in 2002! See why our stories have won 38 Hugo Awards and 24 Nebula Awards, and *Asimov's* itself has won the Locus Award as Best SF Magazine 13 times in a row.

OUR STELLAR CAST FOR JANUARY

Bestselling author **Robert Silverberg,** one of the giants of the field, returns with the thrilling conclusion of his brand-new novel, **The Longest Way Home,** in which a young man who has been hunted and harried across the face of a hostile planet finally returns home, only to face some unexpected dangers *there*—and to find that he's no longer the same person who started *out* in the first place . . . **Robert Reed** takes us to a future world where the governments of Earth finally *have* decided to listen to SF writers after all, just as everyone has always wished, with some odd, disconcerting, and potentially sinister consequences, as we consult some eccentric "Oracles"; hot new writer **Daniel Abraham** introduces us to a high-tech equivalent of Jiminy Cricket, and demonstrates why it may not always work as well as it's supposed to, in the harrowing "Gandhi Box"; multiple Nebula Award-winner **Esther M. Friesner** takes a break from her more usual funny stuff to bring us a bittersweet and moving look at "The Men in the Rain"; **James Van Pelt** plunges into a crowded, claustrophobic, and jittery future society where one harried cop finds himself longing for "The Safety of the Herd"; and **Steven Utley** whisks us back to the distant Silurian Age, millions of years before the dinosaurs were even a gleam in some crustacean's eyestalk, where we'll join his frustrated protagonists in spending our time "Walking in Circles."

EXCITING FEATURES

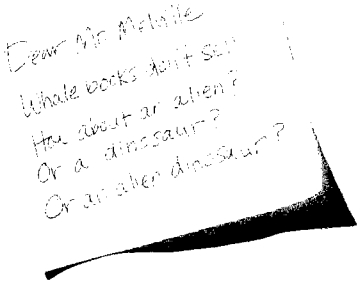
Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" remembers Poul Anderson as "The Skald of Science Fiction"; **Peter Heck** brings us "On Books"; our **Index** is up to date on everything we published in 2001, balloting starts for our **Readers' Award Poll;** plus an array of other features. January is on sale at your newsstand on November 20, 2001. Use an insert to subscribe now or subscribe online at *www.asimovs.com.* With the holidays coming up fast, remember a gift subscription to *Asimov's* makes a great Christmas present!

ELECTRONIC DISTRIBUTION

LICENSED TO DVDIZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Moby Dick
or
The Whale

by Herman Melville



published today?

publishing bureaucracy. That's why Time
.com your work won't be turned
If you submit your work,
eBooks. And if your eBook is
.com to find out more.

iPUBLISH.com
at Time Warner Books
Hope For Today's Writers

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED